

**CHURCH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING:
A MODEL FOR EVANGELISM**

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A DISSERTATION

submitted to
New York Theological Seminary
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Forest Hills, New York, USA

2024

ABSTRACT

CHURCH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: A MODEL FOR EVANGELISM

This research expands upon previous studies of church-based community organizing (CBCO). CBCO is a means of engaging congregations in social justice ministries, offering them a system of discerning the needs of the marginalized and addressing those needs with collective action. While some churches have used CBCO successfully, confusion and uncertainty remain in the minds of many pastors and church leaders, due partly because of the terminology employed by organizers and how that language appears to be inconsistent with the mission and ministry of traditional churches and their theological terminology. I propose a clarification of these terms and a working model of CBCO which relates specifically to the language of churches. CBCO offers both churches and their communities a method to address social issues they face together.

This dissertation describes CBCO methods, explores a theological justification for its use, its strengths, and weaknesses, and will compare CBCO to other models and methods of addressing the needs of the marginalized. The research includes the results of one-on-one interviews with eight pastors who have employed CBCO. The interviews focused on “what worked” and “what did not.” Findings include a composite of best practices and a model for application.

The paper concludes with a model and proposal for implementing CBCO within the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills NY (FPCFH), including a timeline.

This work is dedicated to my wife, who persuaded me to continue my studies; to my family, who provided me encouragement; to my congregation, who willingly shared with me during my research; and to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, whose focus on justice is the source of our own.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Rev. Dr. Robert Folz-Morrison for his help and commitment to this project as my advisor. His encouragement helped make this possible.

I would also like to thank Dr. Juan Battle for his continuous help in writing and editing this paper, for his comments were invaluable.

To my comrades in the New York Theological Seminary Social Justice cohort, and to Rev. Dr. Willie Francois, your partnership on this journey was incredible, and I am grateful to have you as fellow warriors for justice.

To New York Theological Seminary and its staff and faculty, and to Rev. Dr. Walrond, its president, my thanks for creating this course of study, and for your commitment to social justice, for without it, this research would not exist.

I also want to thank all those ministers and faith leaders whom I interviewed or learned from, who have been organizing churches to demand justice - your examples and knowledge are what our churches need in our world today. I am happy to join with you in the struggle.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO CHURCH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

These are revolutionary times. All over the globe men are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wombs of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born.

- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here*

Whether we like it or not, whether we logically choose to face it or not, the world is now undergoing one of the most violent revolutionary upheavals in the experience of mankind. The world we knew as recently as yesterday is as dead as though it had died a century ago. We know that while certain forms and things of yesterday's world still persist, they are nothing but the last twitches of rigor mortis — that world is dead. Any remnants of it are not real but ghosts of the past that will of themselves soon fade into man's memory and what we call history.

- Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*

This is the reason why any effort to build a just society is liberating.

- Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*

This chapter will introduce the reader to church-based community organizing (CBCO) and how it functions as praxis.¹ It begins with an overview of the state of mainline churches today and why CBCO is needed. It then covers some of the historic roots of CBCO through the histories of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Saul Alinsky, two organizers who used CBCO to overcome social inequities through their campaigns. I will describe what community organizing is and how it works, its historical context in this country, and compare and contrast community organizing to CBCO. I will explore CBCO with other methods to address social injustice, including charity, community development, and advocacy.

The Focus of This Research

CBCO is a methodology of developing relationships to act in collaboration with others to confront systemic social injustices together with like-minded people. From the Presbyterian Mission Agency:

Congregational-based community organizing (CBCO) is a means for congregations to engage their members to connect with their neighbors and communities, and to address social inequalities while simultaneously transforming communities and congregational life. Through this model, congregational members share their stories, deepen relationships with one another, discover issues of common concerns, develop leaders and act to improve the lives of members of their communities.²

¹ Definition: Rom. 12:4; πράξις, and πράξεις, "actions, mode of acting, ways, deeds, practice, behavior," Mt. 16:27; Lk. 23:51. Bill Mounce Greek dictionary, <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/praxis> accessed online January 9, 2023.

² *Congregation-Based Community Organizing: Building Vibrant Congregations, Building Just Communities*, Presbyterian Mission Agency, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/pact-cbco.pdf> accessed online September 20, 2023.

CBCO begins with intentional dialogues to create an engaged group, a network, a community, which dialectically discerns what is needed in specific situations and plans responses to meet those needs. The CBCO method has been used in many churches by pastors who have been active with organizing. I interviewed several of them in this research to find common “best practices” for CBCO.

CBCO, rooted in liberation theology, is a ministry of praxis, and ministry builds churches. While CBCO does not always create numeric growth for congregations, the research indicates that CBCO will deepen church community relationships and enhance the social justice ministries of churches that use it.

Personal Introduction of Author

Allow me to introduce my social setting, and how I began this study.

In February of 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, I arrived as the interim pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, NY (FPCFH). Less than three months after I arrived there, George Floyd, a Black man, was killed by White officers of the Minneapolis Police. Protests erupted across the nation, including in Queens, NY. Activists took up the phrase “Black Lives Matter” (BLM), which had been coined and pressed into social media after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was widely quoted by these activists as they protested police brutality and called for civil protections for Blacks. Community organizations demanded changes in police tactics and policies. Police officers began wearing body cameras as cities worked to find ways to avoid wrongful death lawsuits by families of victims killed by police. Like Dr.

King's organization earlier, community organizations came together to demand change, often joined by churches within those communities.

As a White cis-gendered male married to a Black woman with three biracial grown children, I was more than pastorally concerned about these events - the issue of police racism threatened my family. During the summer of 2020, I marched in BLM protests, as did my daughters in Chicago. However, as far as I knew, I was the only person from FPCFH who marched - this despite the fact that FPCFH is an incredibly diverse congregation, home to many immigrants. For compelling reasons, immigrants can be hesitant to participate in public protest, as their protesting can invite racism and backlash: the immigrants become targets, as we have seen far too often in this country. As FPCFH is comprised of a disproportionate percentage of persons of foreign origin, their hesitancy to participate in BLM marches may be understandable.

The BLM activism renewed interest in community organizing, particularly within certain churches and denominations. While community organizing (CO) was not new, interest in CO as a methodology revived, particularly in denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA).³ Indeed, the PCUSA as a denomination had been involved with and financially supported CO efforts with its churches for some decades,⁴ but the interest had been reinvigorated by the activism of BLM and organizations protesting

³ "Real change takes community organizing," *Presbyterians Today*, June 20, 2020, on Presbyterian Mission Agency website: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0720-organizing/> accessed Sep 6, 2023.

⁴ "Since the 1950s the Presbyterian Church has been supporting congregational engagement in CBCO, nationally and globally." From *Congregation-Based Community Organizing Building Vibrant Congregations Building Just Communities*, accessed on the Presbyterian Mission Agency website: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/pact-cbco.pdf>.

against fossil fuels.⁵ Projects such as NEXT Church,⁶ which is affiliated with Metro IAF, gained new member congregations.⁷

Community organizers such as Saul Alinsky have used churches and faith-based organizations as partners in community organizing (CO) for decades, and the concept of CO contributing to churches partnering with organizations such as Metro IAF is not new - much research has already been undertaken to study the effectiveness of faith-based community organizing (FBCO) and its effects on local congregations, as this paper will outline.⁸ FBCO is a particular means of engaging members of congregations in praxis, or the “doing” of social justice. It is not the exclusive means, and this paper will explore other roles and tactics for faith communities.⁹

Community Organizing as Praxis

⁵ Within the Presbyterian Church (USA), there was an overture in 2020 led by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF) to divest from fossil fuel holdings in the Presbyterian Foundation’s investment portfolio. PPF held rallies to call for divestment in cities and churches, as well as the PCUSA General Assembly. See <https://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/fossil-free/#:~:text=%F0%9F%8C%B1%20In%202012%2C%20Fossil%20Free,from%20the%20fossil%20fuel%20industry>.

⁶ <https://nextchurch.net/about-next/> accessed online September 6, 2023.

⁷ NEXT Church began in 2012 with the goal of using CO to reinvigorate the PCUSA.

⁸ Mary Ann Ford Flaherty and Richard L. Wood, *Faith and Public Life: Faith-Based Community Organizing and the Development of Congregations; A Report of a Study Conducted by Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico*, UNM Digital Repository, 2004, p. 19: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sco_fsp/17.

⁹ This chapter will briefly compare and outline CO with charity, community development and advocacy as methods to address social justice. A later chapter will use Bill Moyer’s quadrant of roles within social justice movements: helpers, advocates, organizers and radicals, in Chapter 3.

Community organizing is a broad term which encompasses various methods of gathering individuals of a community together to address specific problems they face in common. Organizers work within their local context, focusing on making change happen by using the power of their interest group, usually against the power of other powerful political or corporate interests. As the website StreetCivics puts it,

Community organizing is a process of building power through collective action in order to address shared grievances or advance shared interests. Organizing of this sort is characterized by an emphasis on power relations and aligning interests. Conflict and negotiation tactics, then, are fundamental.¹⁰

As Bunyan states in his research,

Community organizing as a civil society-led strategy provides an important means through which the interplay of ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ is brought into sharp relief...CO represents a distinctive civil society-led approach to building political agency and contesting relations of power within society.¹¹

Community organizing is a set of methods, practices and strategies that address public problems while strengthening people s capacity to work together and exercise power.¹²

As a Presbyterian pastor concerned both for social justice and for the future of the church as an organization, I sought a methodology to engage my congregation and express their faith in praxis.¹³ Community organizing seemed to offer church congregations a means to become engaged in social justice, strengthen internal

¹⁰ <https://streetcivics.com/community-organizing-basics-power-interests-saul-alinsky/>

¹¹ Paul Bunyan, “Hallmarks of the Political in Community Organizing: An Arendtian Perspective,” *Voluntas Research Papers*, published online 22 June 2021.

¹² https://sites.tufts.edu/civicstudies/major_topics/community-organizing/

¹³ By praxis I mean concrete action, rather than doctrine or dogma - from the Greek *πρᾶξις*, “doing,” per Aristotle.

relationships, create external relationships, and mobilize to improve their communities by taking action together.

The need for change is pronounced, especially in mainline denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), which I serve. If congregations such as the one I serve in Queens are to flourish, or perhaps even survive, they need a new way of thinking about what it means to be “church” today and how that thinking impacts their mission and ministry. Churches that continue to think in conventional ways risk seeing continuing decline.

The Current State of Churches Today

The statistics for church attendance since the COVID-19 pandemic are sobering: from a 2023 study by the church research group PRRI, “Most Americans say they seldom (28%) or never (29%) attend religious services.”¹⁴ Most congregations have seen their attendance drop since 2019, including FPCFH.¹⁵ In light of this, churches are now seeking ways to engage their congregations more in mission and direct ministry, realizing that engagement is the key to retaining and growing membership.¹⁶

Evangelism is a classic tactic for engaging neighbors near a church to convince

¹⁴ “*Religion and Congregations in a Tie of Social and Political Upheaval*,” PRRI, May 16, 2023, p. 5. <https://www.prii.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/>, accessed online Aug 20, 2023.

¹⁵ When I arrived at FPCFH in February of 2020, weekly Sunday attendance was around 50. Today, at the end of 2023, it is half that number.

¹⁶ Carey Nieuwhof, blog, “10 Ways to Grow Your Church (Growing Through Engagement)”, <https://careynieuwhof.com/7-ways-grow-church-attendance-increasing-engagement/> accessed online Aug 23, 2023.

them to join their congregation. Sharing the Good News has traditionally been a means of adding new members to churches. However, while evangelism is a tactic used by many churches to increase awareness and membership in local churches, some churches are resistant to this technique, as their theology is more focused on social justice than on personal piety.¹⁷

There are outreach methods besides evangelism which focus on justice as part of the mission and ministry of the church. These methods include works of charity, community development, advocacy, and community organizing. Each of these has a proper place within church mission and ministry, and each has its strengths and weaknesses. Of the four, community organizing (CO) is most similar in methodology to evangelism, as it is focused on communicating directly with neighbors and engaging in intentional dialogue with those outside the membership of the church. Charity and community development often will engage in dialogue with those outside the church, but their purpose is not to intentionally engage “outside” people with working with the church as an organization, while community organizing has this as one of its main purposes. Partly for this reason, this paper is focused on community organizing, and will compare and contrast CO with charity and community development.

Can churches build their ministry by using the methodology of CBCO? Many churches have done this, but the results are inconclusive as far as church growth

¹⁷ In the Presbyterian Church (USA), evangelism is infrequently mentioned in its modern creeds, while social justice takes prominence in modern confessional declarations such as the Belhar Confession: “...the Church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the Church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.” - from the *Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (USA), 2020.

numerically - some churches have seen membership growth from CBCO,¹⁸ while others have not.¹⁹ However, CBCO has seen some dramatic successes as far as challenging unjust policies and systems, so CBCO can be seen as effective as a method of practicing social justice.²⁰ CBCO is a long-term strategy, not a “quick fix” to help bolster a church’s declining membership. However, CBCO engages church and community members in relationships and events which can strengthen the church itself, while working to transform structural inequities. As Flaherty and Wood conclude, “Faith-based community organizing does important ‘public work’ in two dimensions: first, by strengthening the internal public life of the congregation and second, by promoting greater public dialogue and democratic accountability regarding issues in the political arena.”²¹

I interviewed several pastors who have been involved with CBCO in Queens and other parts of New York City to see how CBCO worked for them and its results. These interviews and my findings will be discussed later in this paper. While CBCO has been used by and with churches for several decades, it became popularly studied two to three decades ago.²²

To better understand CBCO and its usefulness, we begin with a short history of CO and two of its greatest organizers, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Saul Alinsky.

¹⁸ *Going Public, An Organizer’s Guide to Citizen Action*, Michael Gecan, Anchor Books, New York, NY, 2004, p. 140.

¹⁹ Flaherty and Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 10.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 72.

²² E.g., Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed Are the Organized*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

Historic Roots of CBCO

In 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. started the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, GA. While this may not have been the first church-based organizing group, it is certainly one of the most famous, and its successes in the Civil Rights Movement continue to inspire CBCO today. Prior to SCLC being founded, Dr. King had successfully led a boycott against Montgomery, AL bus segregation. He saw the boycott's nonviolent resistance efforts lead to a public victory for Black people in the South. From this beginning, King learned how to organize.²³

Before Dr. King led the Montgomery boycott, Saul Alinsky had successfully lobbied for changes in working conditions and housing in Chicago's "Back of the Yards" neighborhoods in the early 1940's. Alinsky persuaded the Catholic bishop of Chicago to support the neighborhood efforts to confront both Chicago elected officials and local meatpacking businesses to change their policies. Alinsky was not a particularly faith-inspired person, but feeling strongly that injustice must be opposed, he persuaded faith leaders to join him in his efforts.

Both King and Alinsky created successful models for organizing churches to challenge injustice by taking public action. The Poor People's Campaign, which was

²³ "...the local black community, with the support of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., churches—and citizens around the nation—were determined to continue with the boycott until their demand for racially integrated buses was met. The boycott lasted from December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks was arrested, to December 20, 1956, when *Browder v. Gayle*, a federal ruling declaring racially segregated seating on buses was unconstitutional, took effect. Although it took more than a year, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a public bus sparked incredible change that would forever impact civil rights in the United States." From "Pieces of History" blog, *National Archives* online, accessed online December 6, 2023.

created by Dr. King before his death, has been reborn and is now speaking out against injustices across the nation.²⁴ Alinsky's Back of the Yards Neighborhood Association has grown to become the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), an organization that continues to work with churches to this day.²⁵

Sixty years ago, one of the most famous sermons in American history was given by the head of a church-based organization, not in a church, and not to a congregation, but on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. There, Dr. King mesmerized the country with his "I Have a Dream" speech. His sermon helped lead Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act the following year.²⁶ Some may argue that he did not give a sermon, he gave a speech, but *what is a sermon, if not a speech?* As in every sermon he gave, his speech mentioned God and Christian values. His congregation grew to 250,000 attendees, and his service was broadcast to the entire country. Most pastors would love to be able to give such a sermon, and most churches would love to consider the world part of their congregation. The church of the future may be more like the March on Washington and less like our Sunday worship across the country, and church-based community organizing may be the component which brings about this change of focus.

²⁴ <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/>

²⁵ "Beginning in July 1939, the first of such People's Organizations arose in Chicago's notorious stockyard section, Back of the Yards. On that day a people's congress met and gave birth to an organization uniting all the institutions, agencies, power blocs, and interest groups that made up the life of that community. This People's Organization bridged all the economic, social, religious, and political cleavages previously existing between these groups." Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, University of Chicago Press, 1945, p. 61. See also "History of Industrial Areas Foundation" - website: <https://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/history>.

²⁶ National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/nyc/exhibit/mlk> accessed Aug 22, 2023.

Community Organizing and CBCO

Organizing can work both ways. It can help raise people from the bottom by empowering them, or it can also be used to keep them at the bottom by those who don't want them to rise further up.

I recently observed the latter type of organizing at a Zoom meeting that was sponsored by the Queens Borough President's office. At the beginning of the meeting, an attendee announced that there would be a press conference at a location in Queens to protest the construction of an emergency shelter for new migrants arriving in New York City from Texas, Arizona, and Florida.²⁷ (Since this meeting, the tents have been constructed over the protests of local residents.) People from the local community opposed this construction - they did not want these migrants in their neighborhood. Many gathered to oppose building a shelter to house people who are seeking asylum in this country.

This was an example of community organizing working in opposition to those at the bottom.

While the plan to house migrants in temporary shelters is flawed, the biggest reason for the press conference was not to suggest better ways to shelter these migrants, but to protest the migrants being housed in their particular community. It was an example of the Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) phenomenon. It was also an example of community organizing.

²⁷ Borough President Donovan Richards' Queens Civic Engagement Committee Monthly Meeting, July 26, 6:00 PM on NYC Zoom channel, which writer attended online.

Some churches may think that community organizing provides a means for addressing social ills, but if community organizing is simply about consolidating power for the purpose of maintaining relative privilege, then the goals of community organizing may not align with the values of the Christian faith. In situations like the one I observed on Zoom, community organizing can become a tool of oppression rather than one of liberation. Community organizing can become a means of maintaining the status quo for the privileges of those who are in relative comfort.

What I noticed in the above exchange was the lack of voices of those most affected by the decision: the migrants themselves. I spoke during the Zoom meeting as an advocate for the migrants during the conversation, saying that something needs to be done to help them, and explaining that the reason that they fled to the United States was to seek asylum. Of course, this was not the community's problem, this was the migrants' problem, and there were no migrants there to speak for themselves.

When churches engage in community organizing, it must be based on the values of the Christian faith, expressing God's preferential treatment or desired preference for the poor.²⁸ It must be from the voices of "the least of these"²⁹ rather than the voices of the privileged. When marginalized people organize themselves to speak on their own behalf, it's not the same as a community group protesting a shelter in their neighborhood. When those without power gather to speak to power, it is more a matter of survival than

²⁸ "Jesus accompanied this criticism with a head-on opposition to the rich and powerful and a radical option for the poor..." Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 18th printing, 2006, p.134.

²⁹ Matthew 25:40.

comfort. It is not a matter of pure selfishness or greed. It becomes a demand to be treated with the humanity they deserve.

The methods to make that demand by those at the bottom reflect different values from those who organize to maintain their privilege. Their methods can include public shaming, public naming, and creating public outrage for the ill treatment and abuse by those in power who will not help. It involves boycotts for economic coercion and voting campaigns to vote for officials who will act on demands made. These methods take a certain moral tone which demands to be respected.

Churches must be clear about who they are, therefore, and what their ministry is about. If churches do not see themselves as aligned with the poor, then they will allow themselves to be tools of the privileged. This was Marx's critique of religion: that it maintained the status of those in power and privilege and did nothing to alleviate the real suffering of the general welfare of the poor. In this Marx was correct.³⁰

Churches that engage in community organizing need to be prepared to be called names like communists or socialists.³¹ This seems to be often the case with those who advocate for the poor. Fear of being named as communist or socialist may keep churches from engaging in community organizing.³² However, whoever is in a position of privilege

³⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 1843. "The abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* happiness... The criticism of religion is, therefore, *in embryo*, the criticism of that *vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*."

³¹ "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint, but when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." Dom Helder Camara, *Essential Writings*, Orbis Books, 2009, p. 11.

³² "...less than half (45%) (of churchgoers) agree with the statement 'Congregations should get involved in social issues, even if that means having challenging conversations about politics.'" *Religion and Congregations in a Tie of Social and Political Upheaval*," PRRI, May 16, 2023, p. 24.

and power will resist any church's efforts to change the status quo, and they will resort to name-calling and harassment. Churches must become fearless and rely on the gathered bravery of the whole to offset these kinds of attacks., but without church members gathering regularly to encourage each other, churches may lose the appetite for the work needed to make transformation happen.

Historical Context in the United States

Dr. King may be credited with starting the first church-based community organizing (CBCO) organization, the SCLC, which was made famous for its leadership up to and including the March on Washington, which helped lead to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voters Rights Act of 1965.³³ Since that time, CBCO has been seen by many as a positive force.

Community organizing, like labor organizing, is often led by professionals who recruit and train volunteers and volunteer leaders. Effective organizers become the primary means of developing a grassroots organization - in most instances, without such organizers, community organizing fails more often than it succeeds.³⁴ However, the community organizer needn't be a professional organizer - one can see historical

<https://www.ppri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/>, accessed online Aug 20, 2023.

³³ National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/nyc/exhibit/mlk> accessed Aug 22, 2023.

³⁴ "It would be difficult to overestimate the value of organizers in successful congregational development..." Flaherty and Wood, op. cit., p. 54.

examples of pastors who became community organizers and led successful organizing campaigns.

Examples of pastor-led community organizing can be found in the Abyssinian Baptist Church of Harlem. During its 200+ year history, this historic church has had pastors who have spearheaded community organizing efforts, such as Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Sr., his son, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Rev. Dr. Calvin O. Butts.³⁵ Each of these ministers created and led community-based solutions to social problems facing the Black community of Harlem, which are case studies of successful organizing campaigns for us today.

Many Black churches confronted racism in the past by using organized protest and resistance. This was connected to their vision of their Christian faith. It was particularly within the Black church that organizing specifically confronted the problem of racism.

In what came to be called the Black Social Gospel of the late 1800s and early 20th century,³⁶ racism was clearly denounced by Black ministers such as Adam Clayton Powell Senior, Francis Grimké, Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, George Woodbey, and Reverdy Ransom. Ransom in particular preached a message of Black liberation from American white supremacy which would lead to the emancipation of all peoples.³⁷ His

³⁵ Abyssinian Baptist Church website: <https://abyssinian.org/about-us/history/> accessed online Aug 22, 2023.

³⁶ Gary Dorrien, "Recovering the Black Social Gospel," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, summer/autumn 2015, <https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/recovering-the-black-social-gospel/> accessed online Aug 23, 2023.

³⁷ Reverdy Ransom, *The Disadvantages and Opportunities of the Colored Youth*, 1895. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.010002588027&seq=1> accessed online Aug 23, 2023.

message was later connected to the social gospel movement of White ministers such as Walter Rauschenbusch.³⁸

Preaching at the turn-of-the-century from the pulpit of the Bethel AME church in Chicago, Rev. Ransom created a stir by constantly bringing up the plight of Black people during his Sunday sermons. Rev. Ransom wrote a book of sermons, which included the verse, “you shall go over and shall possess that good land,”³⁹ drawing comparisons in the Exodus story to the riches of the continent of Africa and the blessings that Black people from that continent could anticipate from God.⁴⁰ Rev. Ransom later joined forces with W.E.B. Dubois to help form the Niagara movement in the early 1900s. In one of his speeches at a Niagara event, Rev. Ransom compared John Brown, the abolitionist, to Moses and Joshua.⁴¹ While today we recognize how this minimizes the voices of the marginalized by reinforcing the voice of privileged whites, it is still helpful to see how Whites were allies in the cause of racial justice. Dr. King would move beyond John Brown’s violence, adopting the form of nonviolent resistance which organizers today effectively employ.⁴²

³⁸ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1908.

³⁹ Deuteronomy 4:22

⁴⁰ Ransom, “The spirit of John Brown / a speech delivered by Reverdy C. Ransom before the Second Annual Meeting of The Niagara Movement ; Harper's Ferry, W. Va., August 17, 1906.” <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.010002588180&view=1up&sseq=8> accessed online Aug 2023.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² “Brown's actions in Kansas and at Harpers Ferry were clearly violent. He killed people or at least supervised their death. But was he a terrorist? At neither place do his actions comport with what we know about modern terrorists...In the end, we properly view Brown with mixed emotions: admiring him for his dedication to the cause of human freedom, marveling at his willingness to die for the liberty of others, yet uncertain about his methods, and certainly troubled by his incompetent tactics at Harpers Ferry.”

The sermons of these ministers of the Black social gospel were not heard only in America - their cry for liberation and freedom for all reached out from Harlem, Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and San Francisco to places like Germany and South Africa. The call for civil disobedience from Rev. George Woodbey⁴³ and the call for nonviolent resistance from Rev. Howard Thurman⁴⁴ found their expression in the marches and boycotts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King was also inspired by Benjamin Mays to march against racism in the South.⁴⁵

While Rev. Ransom was preaching about inheriting the land, Rev. Grimké was preaching in Washington DC about what he called “the race problem.” In a sermon at the 15th Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, Rev. Grimké declared, “There is but one solution to the race problem and it is to treat the Negro as a man and brother; it will be solved on principles laid down by Jesus Christ or it will never be solved. Let us hope

Paul Finkelman, *Prologue Magazine*, Spring 2011, Vol. 43, No. 1, National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2011/spring/brown.html> accessed online November 21, 2023.

⁴³ “In 1908, (Woodbey) spearheaded...a civil disobedience campaign...A half century later, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee would use similar “fill the jails” tactics in the Civil Rights Movement.” Paul Heideman, “The Life of Socialist George Woodbey Must Not Be Lost to History,” *Jacobin*, May 1, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/05/george-woodbey-debs-socialist-party-free-speech> accessed Jul 22, 2023.

⁴⁴ “It is clear that before love can operate, there is the necessity for forgiveness of injury against a person by a group.” Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1976, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, New York, Scribners. 1971.

there will be an awakening that common sense and the principle of love of righteousness will somehow get the ascendancy and so shall begin the ushering in of a better day.”⁴⁶

Rev. Grimké preached this sermon at what was the height of the Ku Klux Klan in America. Not long after this sermon, the KKK organized a massive march in Washington, DC in a show of force of white supremacy. While there were pastors like Grimke and Ransom preaching against racism, they were the minority - most did not. Today, too many pulpits still remain silent about inequalities based on race, gender, sexuality, economic or educational status. For many preachers, these issues are outside a narrow focus on what they consider the Gospel and salvation in Christ. This narrow focus of many conservative and evangelical Christian ministers too often excludes their participation in efforts to liberate those who are being systemically oppressed.⁴⁷

In his own day, Dr. King faced opposition for his methods of organizing civil disobedience to segregation laws. His *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* was a response to a letter signed by eight Alabama clergymen who called for “our own Negro community to

⁴⁶ Francis Grimke, “The Race Problem - Two Suggestions to Its Solution,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/590be125ff7c502a07752a5b/t/5e6c1250ea160c0c82748f15/1584140882141/Grimke%2C+Francis+James%2C+The+Race+Problem.pdf> accessed online Sept 20, 2023.

⁴⁷ Today, the term “Christian nationalism” is loosely used to conflate evangelical Christians with right-wing ideology (whether rightly or wrongly may be argued): “So who are Christian nationalism adherents? And kind of walk you through some demographics here. One of the more interesting things here is how does this break along religious lines? I'm going to put up just the first half, the adherents and sympathizers here. And the first thing to say is at the top one here, white evangelical Protestants really do stand alone. There's no other religious group in the country that's anywhere near, this is basically two thirds of white evangelicals who are either in the first, in the adherent category or the sympathizer category.” Robert Jones, in a Brookings Institute panel discussion, UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT OF WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM TO AMERICAN DEMOCRACY TODAY, Washington, DC, February 8, 2023, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/gs_20230202_white_christian_nationalism_transcript.pdf accessed online November 21, 2023.

withdraw support from these demonstrations...”⁴⁸ King’s iconic response remains a magnum opus in organizing literature.

Sadly, like then, too many pastors today are overlooking the racism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia found in our country. Seeing this, a new generation of young leaders is increasingly finding that the Christian church does not speak for them.⁴⁹

Organizers like Alicia Garza, one of the cofounders of Black Lives Matter, has very little to say about religion either positively or negatively in her book, *The Purpose of Power*.⁵⁰ This may be due in part to her mostly secular childhood, but it also speaks to the lack of presence by the Christian church in confronting the racism of our day. While many clergy were involved in the Black Lives Matter movement, many, many more were not. When I marched in Queens, there were few pastors with me, sadly.

Ironically, Ms. Garza was motivated by the actions and speeches of Rev. Dr. King, a Christian minister, and Dr. King was influenced by Howard Thurman, a friend of his father's. King carried a copy of Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited* whenever

⁴⁸ “A Call for Unity Text and Background,” <https://www.dbu.edu/mitchell/modern-resources/documents/acallforunitytextandbackground.pdf> accessed online December 6, 2023.

⁴⁹ “But in the years after Trump entered office, left-leaning Gen X and older millennial Americans in particular abandoned church in droves,” according to Burge, a political scientist at Eastern Illinois University and an expert on the “nones.” Perry Bacon, “I left the church — and now long for a ‘church for the nones’,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/21/leaving-christianity-religion-church-community> accessed online Aug 22, 2023. Per Barna Research: “Millennials (those 30 and under) stand out as least likely to value church attendance; only two in 10 believe it is important. And more than one-third of Millennial young adults (35%) take an anti-church stance.” Barna Research, “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church,” Barna Group, March 24, 2014, <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/#.V-hxhL V y6FD> accessed online Sept 27, 2023.

⁵⁰ Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*, One World, New York, NY 2020.

he traveled and referred to it often. In his book, Thurman proscribed a method of addressing segregation through nonviolent resistance.⁵¹ Thurman's description of Blacks standing “with backs against the wall” moved people to bus boycotts, sit-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience in opposition to Jim Crow laws in southern states.

The key to this resistance was organizing, the point of Garza's book and part of the Black social gospel - to confront racism by action, not acquiescence. It was unpopular during the days of the civil rights movement of Dr. King because it was confrontational. It remains unpopular today in many churches for the same reason.

While CBCO has never been widely accepted, churches have historically worked with organizers in the past: Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago supported Saul Alinsky's Back of the Yards Neighborhood Organization in the late 1930s and 1940s in their call for better working conditions and housing in the meatpacking district of Chicago.⁵² Alinsky's Metro IAF continues to work with churches today to address local social issues. In New York City, particularly in Brooklyn and Queens, several churches work with Metro IAF to address matters such as fair housing, jobs, education, criminal justice, and policing.⁵³ CBCO is seen by these churches as part of their mission and ministry to their community and complimentary to their outreach efforts.

⁵¹ “The religion of Jesus says to the disinherited, ‘Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking ways by which you can have the experience of a common sharing of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it.’” Thurman, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁵² “Religion: Prelates Plan,” *Time*, September 2, 1940, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,764559,00.html> accessed online Aug 22, 2023.

⁵³ QueensPower, Metro IAF NYC affiliate, website: <https://www.queenspower.org/> accessed online Aug 22, 2023. QueensPower Executive Team includes leaders from Catholic, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, AME and community centers.

What CBCO Is

While Dr. King had a ready-made community (Blacks in Montgomery, AL) facing a common problem (segregation), Alinsky had a community that was disconnected. King's organization sprang up literally overnight, as the Black community decided to boycott the buses in Montgomery immediately after the arrest of Rosa Parks.⁵⁴ Alinsky started in Chicago, later describing his philosophy of community organizing in his seminal book, *Reveille for Radicals*.

Alinsky borrowed his approach to organizing from the labor movement and unions. "The labor movement has been the key to the door of the future world of economic justice and the social betterment of mankind [sic]."⁵⁵

If the organized labor movement cannot stretch to the broad horizon of objectives, it must then help in the building of a broad general People's Organization whose very character would involve an over-all philosophy and attack. In its simplest sense it would be the extension of the principles and practices of organized collective bargaining beyond their present confines of the factory gate. In this kind of People's Organization, the organized labor movement by virtue of its popular constituency would be an essential element.⁵⁶

Alinsky's goal was national in scope:

The dynamic character of a People's Organization is such that its members recognize the functional relationships existing between issues, and between their

⁵⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Harper San Francisco (paperback ed.), 1991, p. 424-426.

⁵⁵ Alinsky, op. cit., p. 32.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 60-61

community and the general social structure... They realize that their local People s Organization has two major objectives: first, to organize and do what can be done on the local scene, and second, to utilize the organization as a springboard for the development of other People s Organizations throughout the nation. They recognize that only through engaging in a national organizational program amongst millions of other working people can they ever hope to break loose from their shackles and their misery.⁵⁷

Although national in scope, community organizations were locally focused:

Furthermore, being built right up from the roots of the community, a People s Organization is not an outside movement coming into the community. The purpose of the organization should be interpreted as proposing to deal with those major issues which no one single agency is or was big enough or strong enough to cope with.⁵⁸

Confrontation and conflict are inherent in the community organizing model:

A People s Organization is a conflict group. This must be openly and fully recognized. Its sole reason for coming into being is to wage war against all evils which cause suffering and unhappiness. A People s Organization is the banding together of multitudes of men and women to fight for those rights which insure a decent way of life.

The building of a People s Organization is the building of a new power group. The creation of any new power group automatically becomes an intrusion and a threat to the existing power arrangements. It carries with it the menacing implication of displacement and disorganization of the status quo.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 153.

Paul Bunyan studied the effectiveness of Alinsky's method, and concluded the following:

Saul Alinsky, the founder of community organizing, understood that whilst on the surface the problems associated with poor communities were often presented in terms of needs and deficiencies, the underlying causes and how they were to be addressed was fundamentally to do with power. Alinsky's great insight was that in poor communities, institutions such as faith groups, unions and other community-based organizations could be brought together and harnessed to build a more powerful broad-based institution. In the process, radicalism and tradition could be combined in building diverse broad-based coalitions rooted in the lives, values and institutions of the poorest citizens.⁶⁰

Movements such as the Poor People's Campaign attempt to use Alinsky's insights to alleviate the suffering of the marginalized in America. As their website puts it, "We are committed to lifting up and deepening the leadership of those most affected by systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, and ecological devastation and to building unity across lines of division."⁶¹

In the following chapters, I will analyze the CO model of Alinsky as a method for CBCO and present its potential effectiveness for church growth. My analysis includes interviews of several pastors in or near New York City who have participated in CBCO to see what their combined experience says about CBCO as a praxis of ministry.

What CBCO Is Not

Not Charity

Much criticism is leveled at charity and its dependency-inducing effects on a

⁶⁰ Paul Bunyan, "Hallmarks of the Political in Community Organizing: An Arendtian Perspective," *Voluntas Research Papers*, published online 22 June 2021: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00372-4>.

⁶¹ "Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival" website, "Our Principles," <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/our-principles/> accessed Sept 25, 2023.

marginalized population.⁶² CBCO is decidedly not a fund-raising method for charitable organizations because charitable organizations too often simply serve as a means to maintain the status quo.⁶³ CBCO at times is even *opposed* to charity, as it may discourage taking action to alleviate root conditions of poverty.

Not Community Development

Another approach which seems similar to CBCO is community development (CD). CBCO and CD share some relationship-building tactics, which makes them seem similar at times. “Faith-based community organizing (FBCO) has been discussed as a valuable route to individual and collective power and empowerment. It is also more generally recognized for its relationship to community development and community building.”⁶⁴ Community development aims to build structures that benefit the community through partnerships with businesses, local government, and funding sources.⁶⁵ This approach can be less confrontational than CBCO in its methods but may use organizing to make demands of institutions at times to gain cooperation.

⁶² “...a charitable approach confirms asymmetric power relations and fosters a level of dependency that inhibits the agency of people living in poverty.” Chris Shannahan and Stephanie Denning, “Politics, Poverty and the Church in an ‘Age of Austerity,’” *Religions*, 14, 59, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010059>.

⁶³ “We acknowledge that in historic terms the Church in the UK played a role in maintaining an unequal status quo and justifying poverty as an expression of God’s will.” Ibid.

⁶⁴ Brian Christens, Diana L. Jones and Paul W. Speer, “Power, Conflict, and Spirituality: A Qualitative Study of Faith-Based Community Organizing,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(1), Art. 21, 2007, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-08/08-1-21-e.htm>.

⁶⁵ An example would be Nehemiah Homes: “The Nehemiah homes are the product of an unprecedented example of local citizens and churches that bonded together to bring affordable housing to East New York and Brownsville.” From “Nehemiah History” on their website, Nehemiah Homeowners Association, <https://brooklynnehemiah.org/> accessed online December 6, 2023.

Not Advocacy

While CBCO may be seen as advocating for change, it is not limited to advocacy. There are many Christian agencies that practice advocacy, and many are exemplary in their results, but CBCO goes beyond advocacy itself. Advocacy has its place, as organizations such as Church World Service⁶⁶ and Protestants for the Common Good⁶⁷ have shown. Yet these and similar organizations confine their activities to letter-writing campaigns, solicitations, phone calls, and other nondisruptive methods. Organizing has its goal to disrupt the status quo until change is created by creating a crisis in a confrontation with those in power.⁶⁸ The goal of organizing is to demand and negotiate, not to urge or implore. Advocacy shrinks from these tactics.

Charity, advocacy, and CD are alternatives to CBCO to address social justice issues. FPCFH has given substantially to mission partners in charitable donations, which has been for them a form of addressing inequalities. This sense of caring comes in large part from much of the congregation's background as immigrants, leading to a larger

⁶⁶ "Church World Service is a faith-based organization transforming communities around the globe through just and sustainable responses to hunger, poverty, displacement and disaster." From its website: <https://cwsglobal.org/about/> accessed online December 6, 2023.

⁶⁷ Protestants for the Common Good was a Chicago-based organization which existed from 1997 to 2013. It was organized to advocate for world peace. See CauseIQ for financial information: <https://www.causeiq.com/organizations/protestants-for-the-common-good,364080771/>. Site accessed online December 6, 2023.

⁶⁸ From a conversation with Alex Wiesendanger on November 28, 2023. The goal of organized action is to disrupt the system in a significant way, a way which suggests the disruption will continue until negotiations end it with an agreed settlement (e.g., a work stoppage for higher wages). "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has consistently refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue." Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963, p. 2, <https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf> accessed online December 6, 2023.

concern for social justice issues.

Focus of This Research

I must state at the outset that my own site location, the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, is not currently doing CBCO - it is a work in progress, from my instigation. CBCO takes time to see results, usually measured in years. At the conclusion of this paper, I will outline a timeline for CBCO steps with FPCFH.

CBCO is preferable to charity or advocacy, and community development both complements and detracts from CBCO. In the next chapter, I will also explore how Bill Moyer's MAP Model of organizing social movements⁶⁹ can be used as a basis for understanding the role of the organizer and congregation members in CBCO, and I will compare Moyer's role of the Organizer to those of the Helper, the Advocate, and the Radical in social movements and ministries.

CBCO is theologically based on Liberation Theology, which I will also explore in the following chapter. Liberation theology developed in the crisis of conflict and oppression; CBCO actively fights against these by reflection and action. CBCO is intended to be a method of liberation, for in the language of liberation theology, God calls us to freedom.

Chapter Three will outline the scope of the research itself. It will address who was chosen to be interviewed, their backgrounds, their experiences and how these correlate with FPCFH and CBCO activities within its congregation.

⁶⁹ Bill Moyer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, 2001.

Chapter Four will present the research findings. The interviews I conducted will be analyzed and summarized; church CBCO meetings will be described and analyzed. Lessons from each will be drawn and presented.

Chapter Five will discuss ministerial competencies developed throughout this project, while Chapter Six will discuss conclusions drawn from the research.

We begin Chapter Two with an interview of an organizer: Rev. Harper Fletcher, the Executive Director and founder of GreenFaith, arguably one of the most well-known faith-based organizations working to confront climate change. His praxis is derived from liberation theology, in which CBCO is rooted.

CHAPTER 2

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND THE CHURCH

In this chapter, I introduce Rev. Fletcher Harper of GreenFaith, who I interviewed for this project. I will compare and contrast GreenFaith to community organizing, describing how GreenFaith differs from church-based community organizing (CBCO). This will lead to a discussion of churches and organizing, carefully examining theological categories of salvation and social justice work within church mission and ministry. I then will present a theological justification for CBCO and how churches can engage in CBCO themselves.

Introduction

Community organizing is a method of generating hope and creating transformation at a local level. This is consistent with sharing “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18), to those of whom Howard Thurman said,

The masses...live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the dispossessed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs. The search for an answer to this question is perhaps the most important religious quest of modern life.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1976, p. 13.

Sharing good news is not about indoctrination, nor about theology. It is about sharing a message of hope and showing the love of God in tangible ways, becoming the body of Christ together to bring incarnational healing. Praxis is needed for this kind of good news. The church needs to learn how to organize to deliver this kind of good news.

With this line of thinking about praxis and good news, I interviewed the current leader of one of the largest faith-based organizations formed in recent years: Rev. Fletcher Harper of GreenFaith. Rev. Harper formed GreenFaith in 2004 to take public action to address the existential danger of a warming planet. While this may not directly sound like good news to the poor, the poor are disproportionately adversely affected by global warming.⁷¹ Thus, any attempt to address climate change will likely be helpful to the poor, so my hope was to learn more about organizing from someone who has become successful at it in order to help them.

Interview: Rev. Fletcher Harper, GreenFaith

On Friday, June 10th, 2022, I interviewed Rev. Fletcher Harper, Executive Director of GreenFaith.⁷² Rev. Harper has been the head of GreenFaith since 2002 and has grown it from a local faith-engaged group to an international organization. Rev.

⁷¹ “While the effects of climate change are global, and their projected impacts concern every area in the world, a wide scientific literature suggests that climate risks disproportionately affect the poorest countries and people, who are more exposed and more vulnerable to their impacts.” International Monetary Fund, September, 2021, citing “Influence of Climate Change Impacts and Mitigation Costs on Inequality between Countries” published in the journal Climatic Change in February 2020. From the IMF website, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2021/09/climate-change-and-inequality-guivarch-mejean-taconet> accessed online January 9, 2024.

⁷² <https://GreenFaith.org/>

Harper shared his background and motivation for his passion about the issue of climate change, as well as his background in organizing to address this issue.

Rev. Harper grew up in Manhattan, the oldest son of a Wall Street investment banker. Rev. Harper also grew up in the Episcopal Church but was not particularly devout; his sense of spirituality was derived from seeing faith leaders engaged in social justice issues, particularly Mahatma Gandhi and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Observing the activism of Malcolm X, he realized that faith and passion were connected to social justice. These role models were all strong speakers who were able to translate their public anger into action and movements.

After high school, Fletcher attended Princeton University, studying history. Upon graduating, he took a job as an intern with a foundation that provided grants for social justice causes. This experience opened Fletcher's eyes to new possibilities in the world of social justice advocacy. He saw how poverty and limited economic opportunities afflicted communities of color, and began looking for a more meaningful way to create lasting change.

Fletcher enrolled at Union Theological Seminary, earning a Master of Divinity degree and thereafter became an Episcopal priest. When he first enrolled, he resisted entering church ministry because it seemed to him that religion was more interested in money and power than creating real transformation. Despite this, he took a position after graduation as the pastor of an Episcopal church in New Jersey, but his work at the church felt unfulfilling.

In 1992 he began volunteer work at a small faith-based organization engaged in environmental advocacy which had named itself *Partners for Environmental Equality*.

Rev. Harper worked with this group from 1999 to 2002, at which time the organization asked him to become its leader. When he took over as its director, as he put it, “the vision emerged for me.” The connection between faith and environmental advocacy was something that made deep sense to Rev. Harper. It was, as he said, “the intersection between what you’re angry about and what you’re passionate about, that gives life.” This was the meaningful work that he sought.

In 2004, the organization changed its name to GreenFaith, based on its focus on green as environmentally engaged, and faith as the moral impetus for advocacy. By 2006, GreenFaith had expanded nationwide. Rev. Harper attributes this expansion to organic growth achieved through education, training, and active campaigning across the country. In 2013, GreenFaith expanded internationally.

From the beginning, the connection between faith and advocacy was not limited to one specific faith - it included *all* faiths. In 2015, Rev. Harper wrote a book, titled *GreenFaith: Mobilizing God's People to Save the Earth*.⁷³ He has been quoted in national media⁷⁴ and is sought as a speaker on the issue of global warming and the response of faith. As he put it, “All faiths agree: it’s clear that it is wrong to destroy the planet.” According to Rev. Harper, if left unchecked, climate change will hurt over one billion people and will harm nations as autocrats step in to take advantage of the ensuing humanitarian crises that will follow. Rev. Harper’s solution is very straightforward: “It’s not complicated - the world needs to get off fossil fuels which cause global warming.”

⁷³ *GreenFaith: Mobilizing God's People to Save the Earth*, Fletcher Harper, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2015.

⁷⁴ Rev. Harper is a frequent contributor to the Huffington Post.

From this understanding, under Rev. Harper's leadership, GreenFaith has urged people of faith and faith communities to divest their financial holdings from fossil fuel companies. His singular focus has taken GreenFaith from a small one-person organization with an annual budget of \$200,000 to a growing group with a staff of 15 and a budget of \$2 million per year.

Most of their funding comes from foundations, with 80% from grants. Rev. Harper is working to increase the number and amounts of individual contributions and thinks this will increase as more people become engaged with the movement: "People give to things they're involved with."

Involvement has changed and evolved over time as the organization has grown. After some successes calling for divestment, GreenFaith has participated in climate marches and activist mobilizations, bringing different faiths together in what he calls "moral and political critiques." As these actions have grown in frequency and number, GreenFaith's tactics have changed, and members have become more engaged in nonviolent direct action. As an example of such action, Rev. Harper himself was arrested along with thirteen faith leaders in May of 2022 in New York City at a GreenFaith-sponsored event in front of BlackRock Industries, during their annual meeting on May 25th.⁷⁵ GreenFaith became more vocal and confrontational.

Many faith leaders are fearful of taking such an approach, afraid of alienating their congregants or being portrayed as "too radical." Some clergy also oppose such actions for being "too political" and tell Rev. Harper to "trust God - this is part of God's plan." These faith leaders are largely connected to conservative politics, and Rev.

⁷⁵ The author was present at this event and witnessed Rev. Harper's arrest by NYPD.

Fletcher sees little point in trying to engage them theologically. As he put it, 25 to 30 percent of those who are religious are “fundamentalists,” while perhaps 15 percent are “progressive.” It is the 50% of those who would consider themselves to be “moderates” whom Rev. Harper is trying to convince and engage. As he sees it, moderation is dangerous, for it does nothing to address the existential crisis of climate change.

“I get tired of pastoral language,” he quipped, arguing that faith communities aren’t pushing hard enough and fast enough to force policy change. He sees much good in other social justice groups, such as the Poor People’s Campaign, and has much respect for them, along with Metro IAF and others. However, while climate change is important to these organizations, for most people, climate change is “number 4 or 5 on their list of priorities, while for us, it’s our number one priority - our calling is around the climate and the environment.”

Rev. Harper said GreenFaith’s greatest challenge is fundraising, because entrenched corporate interests are fighting to profit from fossil fuels for as long as possible, and they have lots of money. They use their vast profits to disinform and confuse the public to maintain their profits, so it takes money to build organizations to oppose them and fight their disinformation campaigns. As he sees it, the corporations profiting from fossil fuels want people to think the issue is complicated, but it’s not. “The world is ridiculously behind where we need to be, and things will get enormously worse - it’s unpardonable.”

One of Rev. Harper’s challenges in leading an international organization is “decolonizing the way you work” by letting people from the countries most affected by climate change lead. Part of GreenFaith’s new strategy now involves creating GreenFaith

circles, focused in local areas. In the past four years, one hundred new circles have been organized; Rev. Harper's goals are to create thousands of circles across the globe and train local leaders to take action, educate their communities, and recruit people to act together.⁷⁶

This work has given Rev. Harper a great sense of purpose and satisfaction. As he said, "Being engaged in the fight gives life meaning and joy." GreenFaith has given him a chance to take action on something he cares deeply about.

When asked about theologians who influenced him, Rev. Harper mentioned Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Leonardo Boff (specifically citing his book, *Earth Cry of the Poor*⁷⁷). He complimented Pope Francis for his *Laudato Si* encyclical⁷⁸, but he admits he doesn't read a lot of theology these days, nor does he think this is needed. The need is simple and clear: we need to change our ways of consuming energy for the sake of the poor and the planet. As he put it, "The science is clear, and we need to do something now."

At the end of our conversation, I told him my thesis project is community organizing as a type of evangelism. His reaction was, "That makes perfect sense. That's the right approach." Our conversation confirmed that community organizing works and that it engages people when they are working on something that affects them personally and which they care deeply about.

⁷⁶ This writer is actively involved in a GreenFaith circle in New York City.

⁷⁷ *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, Leonardo Boff, trans. Phillip Berryman, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1997.

⁷⁸ *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*, Pope Francis, encyclical letter, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2015.

Since our interview, GreenFaith was one of the leading organizations that coordinated the March Against Fossil Fuels in New York City last fall. Over 75,000 people marched through the streets before the beginning of the United Nations General Assembly, which addressed the issue of climate change. Thousands of people of faith joined the march, including several members of my congregation who attended with me.

GreenFaith and Community Organizing

Rev. Harper's conversation was related to methods, strategies, and tactics that churches may put into use for community organizing. Community organizing is not focused on a single issue, as GreenFaith is, so there are differences. Nonetheless, getting people to act together on a common problem or obstacle is the goal of any type of organizing. The success of GreenFaith shows that organizing can create significant results.

GreenFaith exists solely to take action related to environmental issues. This is obviously an existentially critical issue and affects everyone on the planet, but it does not affect everyone equally. Hunger and violence will affect some communities much sooner than ecocide. For people in those communities, advocating to abandon fossil fuels seems distant to their pressing needs for food and security. Community organizing, properly understood, does not focus on a single issue, but rather discerns the greatest need from the greatest injustice. GreenFaith is successful because the organization is focused and has become effective in gaining media coverage and public sympathy for challenging the fossil fuels industry, but they do not address any other issues, which may leave some marginalized groups feeling uncared for. To some, other needs are currently greater than

fossil fuel divestment. As Bishop Desmond Tutu put it so eloquently, “Good news to the poor is bread.”⁷⁹ The hungry must be fed before they can join the struggle for environmental justice. The oppressed must be freed before they can join the struggle. Other struggles exist.

How CBCO Differs From GreenFaith

Community organizing has this difference from GreenFaith, which is focused on environmental justice; community organizing is focused on having the community identify and address its own greatest need. Ultimately, all human needs are connected to one another, and there is a reason that the term “intersectionality” has become popular.⁸⁰ When one attempts to prioritize one need over others, it appears there are forces aligned together to maintain systems of privilege, with the result that multiple needs exist simultaneously: the poor need food and security, which means they need good-paying jobs, which means they need transportation, and education, and the list goes on. All these needs exist, related to one another, yet organizing cannot confront all of the needs at one time. The greatest need must be addressed first, and this requires analysis.

⁷⁹ from *God's Mission in the World: An Ecumenical Christian Study Guide on Global Poverty and the Millennium Development Goals* (2006) by The Episcopal Church Office of Government Relations and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Bishop Desmond Tutu.

⁸⁰ The term originated in Kimberle Crenshaw’s work: “Because the *intersectional* (italics mine) experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.” From “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Volume 1989, Issue 1, Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw, p. 140.
<https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=uclf> accessed online October 3, 2023.

Analysis begins with listening and hearing what needs exist. Analysis starts with hearing the stories of those hurt by the systems that keep them in the margins.⁸¹

Rev. Harper would agree that the people on the margins are the most impacted by social injustices, including climate change. He borrows from the language and theology of liberationists such as Gustavo Gutierrez, aligned with community organizing.

Gutierrez's concept of "base communities" came from his exposure and experience with poor Christians in his native Peru:

The Christian base communities, which operated mostly without the presence of a priest, contained the threat of restructuring the organization of the Church. They spoke of a place in which theology worked from the bottom up, contradicting the traditional hierarchy that works top down. The Christian base communities could be seen as a place where the Church is no longer needed and the particularity of the Church is lost; the Catholicism of the base communities could be interpreted as a Catholicism that is in name only and has no connection to the Church in practice. Gutiérrez, however, saw the Christian base communities as the foundation for theology. According to Gutiérrez, these base communities were beginning to formulate a theology as they reflected upon their evangelizing actions as a faith community. This process demonstrated the poor's ability and right to think - the poor affirmed this right which they are so often denied in their discussions on God and faith discussions on God and faith. The resulting theology, therefore, is not one of an individual but of the entire community, and it expands itself to include the entirety of the Church.⁸²

Whether organizing for community needs or organizing to address global warming, the church becomes relevant by doing something about the current problems facing the poor. Without such action, the message of Good News sounds like mere words

⁸¹ Per Gustavo Gutierrez, God has a preference towards the marginalized, which is why community organizing within the church is oriented towards them - see *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, G. Gutierrez, English trans. 1988.

⁸² Kimberly Anne Humphrey, "Gustavo Gutierrez' Liberation Theology: Traditional Catholicism from the Perspective of the Afflicted Poor, *Denison Journal of Religion*, Volume 10, Article 2, 2011.

to those Jesus called “the least of these.” It becomes irrelevant, for as James tells us, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26).

Churches and Organizing: Public Protest

In 1969, Hillary Rodham, a graduating senior at Wellesley College, addressed her graduating classmates. Just prior to her speech, Senator Edward Brooke, the first Black popularly elected Senator in Congress and an Army veteran of World War II, gave a commencement address calling for social change through collaboration, cooperation, and civil processes. In his speech, he called protest “unnecessary.”⁸³ Brooke’s speech was forgotten with time, while Ms. Rodham’s was remembered, partly for her saying “every protest, every dissent...is unabashedly an attempt to forge an identity in this particular age.”⁸⁴ Both she and Senator Brooke were speaking at the height of protests against the war in Vietnam, protests which had led President Lyndon Johnson to decide not to run for reelection. 1969, the year following the deaths [do you want to say “murders?” of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and Robert F. Kennedy, was a time of widespread social upheaval, a year that saw widespread protests. Senator Brooke may have seen his words as an appeal to allow the political system to autocorrect, whereas Hillary Rodham remembered that Dr. King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) to confront segregation with direct action and demand changes, rather than wait for legislation to eventually occur.

⁸³ https://gazette.com/opinion/editorials/commentary-the-godfather-saul-alinsky/article_c4ba9210-1380-11e9-bba5-d329e1e3e0d1.html

⁸⁴ <https://www.wellesley.edu/events/commencement/archives/1969commencement/studentspch>

Churches are social institutions and either support or challenge the status quo of their times through either their silence or their speech. Churches that decide to speak out to support the marginalized must organize their speech and action to maximize its effectiveness.

No church should confine its entire ministry to community organizing. Indeed, there is no scriptural support to a claim that Jesus was a community organizer! Although Jesus seems to have used CO tools and techniques, he never seems to fully embrace the CO models of organized action or confronting power with opposing power. In fact, there are scriptures where Jesus seems to be nonchalant at best or even possibly opposed to the goals of community organizing, as when he tells Pontius Pilate that “my kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Jesus does not seem to explicitly call for his followers to gather in his name to challenge the powers that be.⁸⁵

However, Jesus is always concerned for social justice and lives within the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew prophets and their concern for “the widow and the orphan.” Jesus is quoted in Matthew’s gospel as saying, “As you did it to the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). From this we are led to understand that, as liberation theologians state, God is concerned for the poor and marginalized. Given this perspective, CBCO is a natural extension of concern for “the least of these,” a means of public advocacy and work to alleviate the suffering of those at the margins.

⁸⁵ The pursuit of common goods to bless all is penultimate to the pursuit of the Kingdom of God, which is eschatologically ultimate. See Moltmann, *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*, Herder and Herder, 1970.

For those wishing to explore the theological basis for CBCO, I recommend Gustavo Gutierrez' "We Drink from Our Own Wells."⁸⁶ Gutierrez outlines the liberation theology that compels Christians to follow Christ in caring for the poor and marginalized, as Christ was one of them and identified with them. Solidarity with the marginalized is godly and represents solidarity not only with the poor, but with Christ himself. God incarnate is poor and marginalized, and we are called to follow him as such.

CBCO and Salvation

Good news is situational: as stated earlier, Bishop Desmond Tutu said, "To the hungry, good news looks like bread." When Jesus was asked to heal, he did not spend time defining what he was doing - he simply healed those who asked for it. At times he also declared that their sins were forgiven, thus connecting the Greek words for "save" and "heal" (*sozo*), which are interchangeable.⁸⁷ From this understanding, "saving" is healing.

This understanding of salvation also challenges the notion that it is solely about the afterlife, with no regard for this world. Rather, Jesus is shown to be concerned not merely with the afterlife, but with *this* life. His healing acts are more than simply a

⁸⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, Orbis Books, 2003. See also <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/gustavo-gutierrez-and-preferential-option-poor>, accessed online Aug 22, 2023.

⁸⁷ "(sozo) has the basic meaning of rescuing one from great peril. Additional nuances include to protect, keep alive, preserve life, deliver, heal, be made whole. Precept Austin, https://www.preceptaustin.org/save_sozo_greek_word_study accessed online November 29, 2023.

revelation of who he is: they are a revelation of what the kingdom of God is to *be*. The kingdom of God is not a metaphor for life after death: it is better understood as a life in this world where healing and forgiveness are found. Thus, God's kingdom is not about waiting for the afterlife - it's about healing through sharing.

Worship and the Purpose of Churches

We have become accustomed to thinking of worship as the primary reason for the existence of the church. Yet nowhere in the New Testament are we commanded to worship.⁸⁸ Jesus does not command us “go therefore and worship.” Neither does Paul. In Hebrews, where we are commanded “not to forsake our assembling together” (Hebrews 10:25), it does not specifically say we are to worship once a week or even that worship as the purpose of our gathering together. It says that we are to gather together to “encourage one another and all the more as we see the day coming near” (same verse). This may imply worship, but it's not specifically stated. The Gospels themselves have no reference at all to worship, other than Jesus enters the synagogue where they are worshiping and reads and preaches. But he does not command them to continue worshiping. What are we to make of this omission?

This is a critical question to ask. Today, most churches in America seem to spend the majority of their time planning and conducting worship services. Everything else seems to be secondary to the worship of God in a facility built for that purpose. Other activities, such as helping the poor, visiting, or even social events are considered as supporting activities to get people to come to the worship service. If we help the poor, we

⁸⁸ “Jesus never once talked about attending church services, but he talked constantly about healing the sick and feeding the hungry. That is what it seems to mean to be a follower of Jesus.” — Richard Rohr

expect them to reciprocate by coming and worshiping with us! We do not expect them to sit at home. In fact, it seems that many of the activities of the church have as their ulterior motive to get people to attend worship services! It is as if worship is the main function of the church.

Let us examine this more closely. In the Roman Catholic Church, there is a worship service at least once every single day in most of their churches. Often there are multiple services, including Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, and some churches have three masses a day throughout the week. In many Baptist churches, there will be some abbreviated worship service on Wednesday night, or a prayer service, as well as a Sunday evening service and, of course, the main Sunday morning service as well. Mainline Protestant churches typically have one worship service on Sunday morning; some may have two. Nondenominational churches will have at least one Sunday morning service and may have several during the day on Sunday and sometimes a midweek service.

By comparison, how often do most of these churches have set times for helping the poor? How often do they have times set for visiting? These are usually considered special events, not regular routine weekly recurring events. Compared to worship, these occur much less frequently.

What, then, should be the purpose of the church gathering together?

I suggest that perhaps the purpose of gathering together is to do together what God has commanded us to do. While there are verses in the Psalms which instruct us to worship, there are verses in the New Testament that command us to love one another, to

love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies. Perhaps we should think of ways to gather together to do these things, for we are instructed to do them.

If the focus of the church, the body of Christ, the people assembled together to do God's will, is to corporately do acts of love together, then perhaps it should become important to set a time aside to intentionally do this together. Rather than it being once in a while, these gatherings should be at least as often as we worship and perhaps more frequent than that.

How would it change the church if members gathered together to plan ways to love one another and their community every week? What would that look like? What would they do? What would the end result be?

Perhaps this is what we should be recruiting people to join in doing. Rather than joining in worship, which assumes some relationship with God, perhaps we should invite them to do acts of love and join in community as a prelude before they gather to worship. Perhaps we should recruit people to do acts of kindness instead of singing and listening to sermons. I believe this would create a different kind of community than what is created by a worship service.

Theological justifications for CBCO

Was Jesus setting out to create an egalitarian community? Was this the kingdom of God? Was this his agenda? Yes, it was, but not entirely - the New Testament outlines an ethos of care and compassion that God wants us to follow, but it also contains theological language about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and our understanding of these. Much of Paul's writings are oriented towards describing God's salvific work in Christ,

independent of humanity's doing or merit. This is true of the gospels and other epistles as well. However, from this basis, the reader is instructed to lead a certain kind of lifestyle, one of cooperation and mutuality, rooted in our understanding of God's grace which gives us freedom in Christ. This good news is a proclamation of liberty, freedom, and justice, certainly for Christians, but arguably also for all humankind. The prophetic voice of liberation theology points us in this direction.

Liberation theologians take seriously the demands of what was formerly called "the social gospel."⁸⁹ Today the social gospel is seen in what some are calling "progressive Christianity." This form of Christianity takes seriously the commands of Scripture to "do justice and love kindness" (Micah 6:8), to take care of the orphan and the widow (Deuteronomy 10:18), to free the oppressed and bring good news to the poor (Isaiah 61:1), to minister to those Jesus called "the least of these my brothers and sisters" (Matthew 25:40). In the Presbyterian Church (USA) we see this in what is called the Matthew 25 initiative,⁹⁰ which is based on the parable Jesus gave of the sheep and the goats, where the people will be judged according to whether or not they feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, welcome the stranger and visit those in prison (Matthew 25:30-40). In this parable, Jesus indicates who is included in the kingdom of God and who is excluded. Those who are excluded, like those who are included, are based not on what they say they believe, but based on what they did or did not do.

⁸⁹ *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, Walter Rauschenbusch, Macmillan, 1917. Rauschenbusch saw capitalism as essentially corrupting, turning labor into a commodity and reducing citizens to consumers. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/rausch-socialgospel.asp> accessed online Aug 28, 2023.

⁹⁰ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/matthew-25/>

The Christian faith, as the gospel of Luke puts it, is “good news for the poor” (Luke 6:18). Many of the White colonial European missionaries of the past four centuries carried a supremacist message and were part of a system that oppressed the very poor to whom Jesus proclaimed good news - they got his message wrong. Sadly, even today, too many Christian pastors still preach an oppressive capitalist ideology, baptized in the language of the Bible, which blames the poor for their own oppression.⁹¹ It is not difficult to understand how this message has alienated so many people in recent history. Sadly, conservative Christians in America today are too often ignoring the racism, sexism, homophobia, misogyny and xenophobia which are all too present in our country. Because of this, a new generation of young leaders confronting society’s injustices are increasingly finding the Christian church to be irrelevant.⁹²

What are we to make of this? Is social justice an accurate reflection of Scripture and the gospel? If more people thought so, we might see a more just society. We might see more equality, we might see an end to racism and white supremacy, we might see a smaller gap between the very rich and the very poor, we might see a greater sense of community in our nation.

⁹¹ “The identification of Jesus as poor went farther than simply the social and economic context of Galilee in Jesus’ day...Christianity, the Jesus movement, was a social, political, economic, and spiritual movement led by the poor to transform all of society.” Liz Theoharis, *Always With Us? What Jesus Really Said About the Poor*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2017, p. 4.

⁹² “The desire for institutions to address racial justice and other progressive policies may be the principal reason millennials are currently moving away from the church as an institution,” said Bishop Yvette Flunder, senior pastor of City of Refuge, United Church of Christ, and the presiding Prelate of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. ‘They’re trying to find like-minded millennials who are very interested in doing the work of policy, doing the work of justice, and organizing,’ Flunder said. ‘And they’re feeling that the church, as it is called monolithically, is not really on board.’” - PBS News Hour, March 30, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/where-does-the-black-church-fit-in-todays-black-lives-matter-movement> accessed online May 24, 2023.

From a theological perspective, we need to look at social justice from the perspective of Scripture. When we look at Scripture, three words emerge that are interrelated: justice, liberation, and freedom. They are not the same, of course, but their concepts are connected.

Justice, from the Hebrew word *tzedek*, is connected to the idea of making things right, of the righting of wrongs. Justice alleviates inequality by making things more equal. The Hebrew prophets continually advocate against the miscarriage of justice by the leaders of Israel.

Liberation is scripturally related to the concept of deliverance. We see this in the story of Exodus and Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery into a land of plenty. Moses is the deliverer, the prophet who leads God's people out of bondage and servitude. Liberation is exactly this - release from bondage and servitude into plenty.

Freedom is seen both in the Hebrew Bible and in the writings of Paul in the New Testament. In Paul's writings, freedom is liberation from sin and bondage to self and fleshly desires. As Paul says in Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; do not be yoked again by the slavery of the world." Freedom is freedom to serve; specifically, to serve God and to serve one another. In Paul's theology the two are related: we see this in Romans chapter 12 and 13 where love is the fulfillment of the law, and love is shown in service to others.

We may wish to consider conversion as the beginning of the revolutionary impulse to a radical service of God and others. Rather than the inner piety seen in some evangelical theologies, conversion (from the Greek *metanoia*, which means to change the mind) may be considered a new outlook to the common good, rather than simple egoistic

desires. This conversion leads to an empathic concern for others shown in communal action for their welfare.

The prophet Amos lambasted the Israelites for their lack of concern for the plight of the poor:

They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.
They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed (Amos 2:6).

God called this prophet to proclaim wrath and judgment on Israel for their wickedness, which included economic inequality. This is consistent with the Levitical laws, which commanded the Israelites to release debts, free slaves, take care of widows and orphans, and show hospitality to strangers and foreigners in their land. As the Psalmist wrote, “Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute...” (Psalm 82:3).

This concern for the poor continues even more strongly into the New Testament. Jesus is quoted to say, “No one can serve two masters, for a servant will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Matthew 6:24). In Luke’s gospel, Jesus compares the lives of a poor beggar, Lazarus, with that of a rich man and their fates after death. The poor man goes to paradise, while the unnamed rich man is in torment in Hades (Luke 16:19-31).

The writer of James decries,

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure during the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You

have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have nourished your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you (James 5:1-6).

The pseudepigraphic writer of 1 Timothy puts it thus: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains” (1 Timothy 6:10). From verses such as these, we should discount the “prosperity gospel” which has become popular with many preachers. While God is not glorified by the poverty of God’s followers, God identifies with the poor, not the rich, for the rich become rich by taking advantage of the poor.

A better understanding of God’s intent may be found in Paul’s letter:

For I do not mean that there should be relief for others and hardship for you, but it is a question of equality between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may also supply your need, in order that there may be equality. As it is written, The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little” (2 Corinthians 8:13-15).

From this perspective we may be led to understand that material resources are meant to be shared, not hoarded. Those who have are called to share with those who do not.

This radical sharing is most explicitly illustrated in the story of Pentecost:

Peter said to them, Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the

apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:38-47).

From this story we understand that believing in Jesus Christ led to baptism, devotion, and the sharing of goods. Faith is exhibited in communal sharing of resources, which were distributed to any who had need. Indeed, this radical sharing may have been the basis of the early church's growth.⁹³ There is no separation seen here between personal piety and communalism.

Community organizing, including church-based organizing, has long been aligned with communalism, and even communism, in decades past.⁹⁴ Redistribution of wealth is its major intent - those without resources take action to demand resources from those who have them, under threat of some form of collective negative action. In labor organizing, that threat is the loss of workers in the form of a strike. For community organizations, that threat can be a boycott, civil disobedience to shame the owners of the resources, or other means, but the goal is one of redistribution: those who have are being called to give to those who have not.⁹⁵

⁹³ Drew G. I. Hart points out the explicit calls for redistribution of wealth by the early Church Fathers: op.cit., p. 249-250.

⁹⁴ Roland Boer, *Red Theology: On the Christian Communist Tradition*, Brill, 2019.

⁹⁵ In the case of the civil rights movement, the demand for redistribution was equal access to public spaces which had been reserved for Whites only.

As we have seen, this is consistent with the biblical call for justice. God demands justice, the fair distribution of wealth to all. The following chapter will make this more explicit as I use liberation theology to analyze CBCO as a means to achieve God's desire for justice.

CBCO challenges the myth of success as personal achievement by changing the narrative. Instead of using the narratives of the powerful to keep the poor in poverty, CBCO begins with the stories of the poor, rather than the rich, and uses their stories to subvert the myths of the wealthy. These stories become public narratives intended to change the perspective of both the public and those who hold onto wealth.

The Process of Organizing

The CBCO process begins with listening, then progresses to collective storytelling, then analysis, then direct action, using the stories of the marginalized to confront those in power.

Involvement in a broad-based community organization allows for alternative individual and collective narratives to be created. It is through action that public freedom is expressed and new narratives formed...It is through public action that citizens become visible on a public stage. Dignity and recognition can thus be understood in political and intersubjective terms as qualities of esteem and respect that appear between plural beings who act together in concert.⁹⁶

Narrative is paramount in CBCO:

Through participating in community organizing, people often develop the understanding that prevailing narratives most often reflect the interests and

⁹⁶ Paul Bunyan, "Hallmarks of the Political in Community Organizing: An Arendtian Perspective," *Voluntas Research Papers*, published online 22 June 2021.

experiences of the powerful, and that these powerful actors have a vested interest in preventing people from identifying shared challenges and acting collectively to address them.

Recognizing the structural origins of personal challenges reframes their solutions, suggesting that collective actions to change structures - rather than individual changes in behavior - are needed to achieve desired changes.

The co-creation of narratives through dialogue can be a form of resistance to oppression... Thus, through dialogue, people can become partners in deconstructing the narratives that uphold oppression and in co-creating stories of a more just world.

‘Stories of self’ communicate the values that define who we are... They communicate aspects of one’s personal identity which are ‘nested’ within collective stories drawn from our faith, friends and family, media, and other features of social life.

The ways people understand their position in society are developed through interaction with others. Participants’ descriptions of their ‘stories of self’ revealed moments in which participants became aware of their own oppressive internalized logics and decided to act against them. In this narrative, the individual is framed as a political being - as affected by political decisions, as having a voice in how those decisions are made, and as having a responsibility to use their voice to inform those decisions.⁹⁷

Sharing of personal stories becomes part of a larger collective story:

Like stories of self, stories of us articulated participants’ relationships to social and political systems. Stories of us were explicit, however, about the shared experiences that participants discovered through relationship-building, and about the power of organized groups to influence democratic systems. Building relationships enabled individuals to recognize how their experience was linked to others, and to begin viewing that collective experience as a *political* one. This story of us intentionally shifts narratives about helplessness to interconnected narratives of collective efficacy and mattering.

⁹⁷ Krista A. Haapanen, Brian D. Christens, Hannah E. Freeman, Paul W. Speer, and Gavin A. Cromwell-Williamson, “Stories of self, us, and now: narrative and power for health equity in grassroots community organizing,” *Frontiers of Public Health*, 2023, p. 6.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1144123> accessed online September 12, 2023.

These new narratives were often *counter* to internalized cultural narratives about the community which, for instance, framed community members as powerless to change community conditions and ignored by political decision-makers. New narratives, developed as members participated in organizational processes of research and action and were exposed to organizational narratives catering collective efficacy, democratic accountability, and political participation, reflected hope to the future. New narratives therefore expanded members' perceptions of what futures were possible for themselves and their communities, providing the foundation for action.⁹⁸

CBCO is spiritually connected to a theology of praxis, or action. It is "faith in action," as one faith-based CO organization has renamed itself.⁹⁹ By gathering collectively to demand just distribution of resources, faith becomes realized. As Dr. King said, "It is not enough for the church to be active in the realm of ideas; it must move out into the arena of social action."¹⁰⁰

A scriptural example of this can be found in the book of Nehemiah:

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain." Others were saying, We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine." Still others were saying, We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others." When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

⁹⁹ <https://faithinaction.org/>

¹⁰⁰ *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Harper San Francisco, 1986, p. 476.

my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say. So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.” “We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!” At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised (Nehemiah 5:1-13).

In this story, Nehemiah hears the stories of those who were being abused by the nobles and officials of Judah, charging high interest for taxes. The people came together and organized a complaint, which Nehemiah presented to the ruling officials, who then relented. This serves as a scriptural example of CBCO in action.

The following chapter examines the use of CBCO within the Presbyterian Church (USA) and how CBCO aligns with other methods of mission, using the Owens Quadrant to explore CBCO, activism, charity, and traditional evangelism methods. I will map these in the context of FPCFH and show how each of these can support the others and how each can be used for church growth and development.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

This chapter addresses church-based community organizing (CBCO) within the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), CBCO, and the Bill Owens MAP model, and suggests new terminology for churches using CBCO. Additionally, this chapter covers the site location for my research: the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills NY (FPCFH) and its historical context, as well as a snapshot of the community around FPCFH. Lastly, the chapter covers the subjects I interviewed for my research and the questionnaire I used.

CBCO and the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Since the 1950s, the Presbyterian Church has been supporting congregational engagement in CBCO, nationally and globally. Today, we work with CBCOs across the United States to create a public and powerful voice for justice. CBCO is one of the many ways that Presbyterian congregations work for justice and create social change.¹⁰¹

Since 2009, the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA), a ministry of the PCUSA, has provided grants to churches to help fund community organizers. These grants have

¹⁰¹ “Congregation-Based Community Organizing Building Vibrant Congregations Building Just Communities,” booklet, Presbyterian Mission Agency, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/pact-cbco.pdf> accessed online Aug 23, 2023.

come from the Presbyterian Hunger Program and are allocated from the denomination's participation in the One Great Hour of Sharing special offering each year.¹⁰²

The PCUSA works with DART (Direct Action and Research Training Center¹⁰³) and Metro IAF in different cities across the country, particularly larger metro areas.

Chapter 1 mentioned NEXT Church, whose mission statement is, "NEXT Church is a purposeful relational community of Presbyterian leaders whose mission is to strengthen a vibrant and thriving PC(USA) that shares the good news of Jesus Christ in ways that matter to and have impact on God's evolving world."¹⁰⁴ NEXT Church works with Metro IAF and Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary in Baltimore, MD to provide training in community organizing for Presbyterian ministers and lay leaders.

CBCO and Moyer's MAP Model

Social movements are collective actions in which the populace is alerted, educated and mobilized, sometimes over years and decades, to challenge the powerholders and the whole society to redress social problems or grievances and restore critical social values. Social movements are powerful means for ordinary people to successfully create positive social change, particularly when the formal

¹⁰² "The [Presbyterian Hunger Program](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/congregation-based-community-organizing-building-v/) is one of the [Compassion, Peace and Justice](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/cbco/) ministries of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. Its work is made possible through gifts to [One Great Hour of Sharing](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/cbco/)." <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/congregation-based-community-organizing-building-v/>; <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/presbyterian-hunger-program-webinar-offers-advice-on-grassroots-organizing/>; <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/cbco/> accessed online Sept 26 2023. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/compassion-peace-justice/hunger/cbco/> accessed online Sept 26 2023.

¹⁰³ <https://thedartcenter.org/> accessed online November 21, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ <https://nextchurch.net/mission-and-vision/>

channels of democratic political participation are not working and obstinate powerful elites prevail.¹⁰⁵

In Bill Moyer's "Movement Action Plan,"¹⁰⁶ he outlines four roles needed for a successful social movement. He terms these the *citizen*, the *rebel*, the *change agent*, and the *reformer*. Each plays a different role at different stages outlined by Moyer as a movement progresses to change society. His model for change goes through eight stages, from the status quo to recognition of a social problem to what he calls the "take-off phase," which he largely identifies as social protest. This then leads (hopefully) to larger public acknowledgement of the problem, where a majority want a resolution. The resolution is created through democratic processes, and the cycle repeats itself with whatever new crisis occurs.

CBCO is connected with each of these roles and stages, but particularly with the role of change agent, which is found in Moyer's phase after the take-off phase. To compare CBCO with activism, we turn to Moyer's roles, beginning with the *citizen*. In Moyer's model, we all begin as interested citizens, and in this capacity, we listen from a perspective of self-interest, with values we hold in common with other citizens. Citizens are simply members of society who are affected by it.

The rebel, or *activist*, calls attention to specific social problems. Most importantly, activists must remind the public that the source of legitimate power is the

¹⁰⁵ Bill Moyer, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steve Soifer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, 2001, p. 10.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

citizenry and not self-serving interest groups or institutional political and economic powerholders.

The social movement needs to consciously place itself squarely in the center of society, not on its fringes. Therefore, the more the movement is grounded in democratic values and national norms, the more likely it will be to withstand these attacks and gain the influence and involvement of the general citizenry.¹⁰⁷

The MAP model strives to move citizens to support social change, either actively or by accepting new policies. This is the strategy for the rebel, or activist: to promote new policies and demand a change in the status quo.

Rebels promote the democratic process.

Rebels often use extra-parliamentary means, that is, methods outside normal political channels, including nonviolent direct action and community education in the form of rallies, marches, leafleting, and petitions. Rebels literally use their bodies to stop the wheels and mechanisms of official institutions and powerholders.

Rebels are usually the first to be recognized as challenging the status quo.¹⁰⁸

We see this role in street demonstrations such as BLM and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as in nonviolent demonstrations such as sit-ins. Whereas this activity may resemble some of the tactics of the direct action of CBCO, it is usually different, and based on a single issue, rather than based on a chosen organizational priority or strategy.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p. 24.

Activists create awareness of a social injustice that organizers can later use to their advantage.¹⁰⁹

Organizers would be analogous to change agents in Moyer's model.

Change agents play the key role when the movement has gained majority public opinion, just as rebels play the central role during a movement's take-off stage. In contrast to rebels, who put themselves in the public spotlight through direct action, change agents are less visible as they organize, enable and nurture others to become actively involved in the democratic process. The change agent's goal, therefore, is to help create an open, public, democratic, and *dialectic* process in which all segments of society are engaged in resolving social problems. The change agent's role in building participatory democracy and creating new democratic structures is as important as winning on a specific issue.¹¹⁰

While change agents gain agreements from powerholders, ultimately *reformers* must put those agreements into formal settings.

Reformers must then convert the acceptance of alternatives into new laws, policies and practices of society's appropriate political, legal, social, and economic institutions. This requires parliamentary and legal strategies and actions, such as referenda, political campaigns, lawsuits, committee and commission hearings, and petitions, which make use of official judicial, legislative, political, and other institutional channels. In carrying out this role, social movement reformers often act as power brokers between the movement and mainstream legal, political, economic, and legislative institutions and powerholders.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ A specific example of activism in Moyer's model would be the GreenFaith action at Blackrock headquarters cited earlier.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 26.

For purposes of more direct comparison, I will use Moyer's definition, while changing his labels:

Citizen = "Helper"

Rebel = "Activist"

Change Agent = "Organizer"

Reformer = "Advocate"¹¹²

As Moyer sees each role being needed in any successful social movement, there is opportunity within society and churches to have people in each of these roles during the process of making progress on multiple issues. In congregations, members can opt to be helpers, activists, organizers, or advocates, depending on their abilities, personalities, gifts, and social location. This may be true for congregations as well - some may be able to organize, while others may advocate or help, and some may opt for activism. Each role contributes in its own way.

CBCO occupies the *Change Agent/Organizer* role, while at times it may use the Rebel/Activist role as well. There can be times when there may be clashes between roles, due to misunderstanding of the interdependency of each and misunderstandings of purpose. Moyer gives the example of how Activists may accuse Organizers of compromising principles, while Organizers may accuse Activists of being naive and

¹¹² <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/what-role-were-you-born-to-play-in-social-change/> accessed online Aug 28, 2023.

idealistic. However, without ideals, there is no progress, and without compromise, there can be no progress either. Helpers and Advocates are also needed.¹¹³

As Ephesians suggests, we each have our gifts, our strengths to offer for the greater good (Ephesians 4:11). Paul uses the analogy of the human body in 1 Corinthians 12, saying,

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet,

"I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (1 Corinthians 12:14-26).

Every social justice movement needs helpers, activists, organizers, and advocates to succeed, and each of these needs to understand how they contribute to the movement and appreciate the other roles within the movement.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Drew G. I. Hart suggests what he calls a "hybrid approach" using both activism and organizing, which he claims is the approach of the Poor People's Campaign; *Who Will Be a Witness? Igniting Activism for God's Justice, Love and Deliverance*, Herald Press, Harrisonburg, VA, 2020, p. 324.

¹¹⁴ "As much as organizers might wish for strategic unity, in the end, movements are diverse and messy formations, involving both inside and outside politics. Bayard Rustin's proposal that movements

By using some tools to augment our understanding of CBCO as a methodology, we can invite congregants to become involved in church organizing in a variety of ways and in increasingly active and engaged roles. Each role can be seen as being more progressively engaged in the process: someone can begin as a helper, then take public action with an activist, then collectively act with an organizer, and then can, if they are able, work as a reformer. The same person may also find herself or himself taking different roles at different times on different issues: a woman may help with one cause (e.g., passing out flyers for fair housing), protest for another (e.g., participate in acts of civil disobedience for criminal justice reform), collectively bargain for a third (e.g., be part of union negotiations for a living wage), and advocate for a fourth (e.g., work with educators for better schools), all at different times and places. Of course, most people, especially working and/or marginalized people, will not have the time or ability to do all this, but over time, perhaps over some years, she may be engaged in a variety of roles in different campaigns.

transition from “Protest to Politics” proposes a linear progression for organizers to follow, but an alternate way of looking at movements would use an ecological perspective. At any given time, a movement will contain groups and individuals devoted to different strategies and organizing models: In addition to the advocates of disobedience that Piven champions and the inside-game players that Schlozman highlights, there will be base-builders who focus on building unions, community organizations, and other structure-based groups, and there will be counter-cultural groups focused on keeping radical ideas alive by carving out alternative spaces and dissident communities. Each of these approaches has important contributions to make, and all of these tendencies together help to form an ecosystem that promotes change.” Mark Engler and Paul Engler, “Should We Disrupt the Democratic Party or Take it Over?” WagingNonViolence.org, January 13, 2022, <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2022/01/should-we-disrupt-the-democratic-party-or-try-to-take-it-over/> accessed online November 18, 2023.

A Presbyterian organization that understands and uses this approach is the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF), which utilizes what they term a “ladder of engagement:”

A ladder of engagement is a way to think about how people are involved in PPF and how we can invite each other to “take a next step” in terms of involvement in PPF. The idea is that people move from an entry point within the organization to a role with more engagement and commitment. This leads to building teams with strong shared leadership. This is a helpful tool for all leaders in PPF to think about, because this is a primary way of developing leadership—by inviting people into more and higher engagement and investment in the work of PPF.¹¹⁵

Using Moyer’s MAP stages of social movements, PPF’s “ladder” allows people to engage at entry points from initial stages (e.g., helper) to later stages (e.g., activist or organizer) by having conversations as the movement grows. This is an organic process of seeing greater numbers of congregants, community members, and congregations getting involved in CBCO over time, starting with a core group and allowing others to participate at their own comfort levels as they get to know and understand the issues being addressed and their role in the process.

A New Language for CBCO

From my research, it seems one reason CBCO is rejected by many churches and church leaders is because the language of community organizing, and the language of evangelism and discipleship seem to be unrelated. There is a reason for this - their objectives are not identical, and their terminology reflects this. To gain acceptance from churches, there should be a correlation from CBCO terminology to a more specifically

¹¹⁵ Presbyterian Peace Fellowship website:
<https://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/structure/ladder/> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

spiritual language. While Christians will use terms specifically used in historically church settings, other faiths may need to develop a similar correlation between their sacred scriptures and the language of community organizing.

For the purposes of this research, I propose the following terminology:

CBCO term	New church term
Self-interest	Deep concern
Community Organizing	Creating Community
One-on-one Interview	Conversation
Action	Event
Small Group Meeting	House Meeting
Canvassing	Surveying
Demands	Calls
Research	Research
Liberation	Liberation

Note that not all CBCO terms need to be changed - research and liberation are perfectly fine words to use in a church setting.

In 2013, Rev. Eddie Knox of Pullman Presbyterian Church, located on the south side of Chicago, worked with the Community Renewal Society of Chicago to actively protest gun violence within Illinois. Rev. Knox coordinated getting a busload of church members to attend a rally in Springfield, the state capitol, and have a “die-in” during the legislative recess. Pullman was one of dozens of churches that participated, and hundreds

of protesters laid on the floor, representing the deaths in the state from gun violence. During his organizing, Rev. Knox never mentioned the word “organizing” or “protest,” and dozens of people came with him on the four-hour trip there and back. Rather than focusing on terminology, CBCO organizers should focus on the intended results, using whatever language motivates church members to participate.

Site Location

The First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills NY (FPCFH) is quite diverse, and it is also largely economically middle-class, which has allowed it to be generous. Most of its members hold stable jobs and live in better housing. CBCO is often associated with marginalized or disadvantaged communities, which FPCFH is not. However, CBCO as a tactic can build bridges to communities of greater need in nearby neighborhoods, and FPCFH can become a significant ally with other community organizations.

While FPCFH may not specifically align with being a marginalized community itself, CBCO is a methodology to address wider issues than merely local or parochial concerns. As Alinsky pointed out, when individuals gather to discuss their interests, they often tend to find more liberal solutions together as the result of their dialogue.¹¹⁶ CBCO stands as a process of bringing greater social justice to those communities that practice it. Because of the success stories I discovered in my research of other churches, I have begun using CBCO methods at FPCFH as well.

¹¹⁶ Alinsky, op. cit., p.123. “In the last analysis all these people and agencies find that they have put their individual objectives into a collective basket and the easiest and best way for them to get what they want is to work with the whole group so that the whole group will get the whole basket. After a while it really isn’t such [a] complicated...because they really are concerned about the other guy’s welfare *and because they know by that time that the other guy’s welfare means their own welfare.*”

During my research, I employed Alex Tindal Wiesendanger as an organizing coach. Wiesendanger is the author *Seeds of Justice: Organizing Your Church to Transform the World*, by Orbis Books.¹¹⁷ This book was used to create and evaluate CBCO strategies for FPCFH.

Applied Setting: The First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills NY (FPCFH)

As I stated earlier, I began as the interim pastor of FPCFH in Queens, NY, six weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down New York City in March of 2020. Half of the first two years of my ministry was online only. Since then, I have been installed as a designated pastor. My research is from this location and experience.

The First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills' sanctuary sits in the middle of Queens. In the mid-1950s, Forest Hills was a fairly suburban part of New York City, somewhat conservative politically, almost entirely White, with a largely Italian immigrant community and a growing Jewish population. The Presbyterian Church was full most Sundays, as most churches were. The life of the church revolved around Sunday worship.

Today, the congregation is one of the most diverse in the Presbytery of New York City, with half its members being born in another country. Elected elders of the congregation have come from the Philippines, India, Colombia, Madagascar, Guyana, China, Latvia, Germany, and from New York City itself. English is the common language. All current members grew up in Christian churches in their home countries,

¹¹⁷ Alex Tindal Wiesendanger, *Seeds of Justice: Organizing Your Church to Transform the World*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2020.

where Sunday worship was the expectation. Like the 1950s, the focus of most of the church congregation is on Sunday worship.

Now, unlike the 1950s, two-thirds of the pews at FPCFH are empty on Sunday worship services. Attendance had been dropping since 1962, declining yearly until 2019. The 2020 pandemic accelerated the trend alarmingly. At the rate of decline since COVID-19, the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills is in jeopardy of closure within a decade. The heyday of the 1960s may be the high-water mark for attendance unless the church recreates itself. FPCFH needs a method to renew its ministry and mission and build community.

In the 1950s, FPCFH was racially segregated by virtue of city zoning restrictions that today are illegal. Back then, racial and social justice concerns lay outside the Forest Hills perimeter. Today, Forest Hills remains economically privileged, but it is more connected to the rest of NYC than it was in the 1950s, and Forest Hills as a community is now impacted by a lack of affordable housing for its residents, immigration concerns, a lack of affordable health care for many who live here, anti-immigrant hate, and other social justice issues. FPCFH needs a method to help address problems facing its community as part of its ministry and mission.

FPCFH: Historical Context

In 1910, the recently formed Sunday School of Forest Hills held a fair to raise funds for the construction of a sanctuary. It was the first community event in the area.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ John D. Frame, “The First 80 Years of the First Presbyterian Church Forest Hills, NY 1913-1993 (unpublished FPCFH pamphlet), p. 3.

From its beginning, the Forest Hills Free Church focused on charitable works, including working with the East Side Tenement House, working to reduce unemployment, increase literacy, and supporting missionaries abroad.¹¹⁹ In January of 1920 the church became Presbyterian. “This change has been and continues to be of inestimable value to our Church, as it identified it with a progressive denomination...”¹²⁰ As an example of being “progressive,” the first woman elder was elected to serve in 1932.¹²¹

By 1948, membership of the original Free Church of 48 members had increased to 229 within FPCFH, and its then-current Pastor “liked to speak of the Church as a ‘healing community.’ His emphasis on communal life was reflected...in activities such as Saturday evening dances and basketball games, and Mens’ Club shows...”¹²² This reflected the concept of the time of the church being more of a community center than simply a place of worship.

At the time of Dr. King’s organizing in the 1960s,

“...the Forest Hills Church did not realize that it was entering into a turbulent period of our national history. The first crisis was the struggle to implement racial integration in American society...Then, the nation and Forest Hills became engaged in the generational struggle related to the Vietnam War.”¹²³ “Some old-time members...transferred membership to churches less willing to deal with societal problems. At the same time the number of new visitors began to drop, in part the result of young people’s suspicion of all establishments, including the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 4-5.

¹²⁰ Herbert Chase, “Fifty Years of Devoted Christian Service through the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, NY, 1913-1963), unpublished FPCFH pamphlet, p. 7.

¹²¹ Frame, op.cit., p. 8.

¹²² Ibid., p. 11.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 22.

organized Church.”¹²⁴

1964 was the zenith of this congregation’s membership, peaking at 364, with two Sunday services each week, a high point it has not reached since. Current membership stands at 98.

Church Elder John Frame concludes his history of the congregation in 1993, “The church...has undergone great changes in the past 30 years. In the late 1970s, increased racial integration of housing, actively supported by the Forest Hills Church 15 years earlier, began to be reflected in the membership of our congregation and its Boards.”¹²⁵

His last words seem prescient:

The First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills has survived by adapting itself to the demographic and social changes in its community. The future of our church will likely depend upon its continued ability to adopt new styles of ministry while maintaining its essence as a loving and healing community.¹²⁶

Community Snapshot: Who is our Neighbor? What is our Role?

The Mission Review Committee of FPCFH conducted a community survey in 2021 with several nonprofit organizations and faith communities in Forest Hills and neighboring areas. To summarize some insights from the survey:

- Survey respondents listed wanting diversity in ethnicity and age, a strong sense of fellowship and community, and active mission outreach as the most common answers for what they seek in a faith community.
- Survey respondents cited a number of pressing issues in their own communities, including: the lack of affordable housing and homelessness (number one), followed by food insecurity. Other social issues mentioned included lack of

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

community, safety, crime, and racial hatred (citing a number of anti-Asian hate crimes in Queens in 2022).¹²⁷

Interview Subjects

For my research, I interviewed eight pastors from the New York City area who had participated in CBCO themselves. They include: Rev. Peter Cook, Rev. Phil Tom, Rev. Benjamin Perry, Pastor Zac Martin, Rev. Anna Taylor-Sweringen, Pastor Brunhilda “Sandy” Sanders-Lane, Rev. Emily Brewer, and Rev. Dr. Aqueelah Ligonde. A note on each of them follows below.

Rev. Peter Cook

The Reverend Peter Cook serves as Executive Director of New York State Council of Churches, which represents 7,000 churches across the state of New York. Ordained in the United Church of Christ, Reverend Cook received his BA from Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, and an MA in Liturgical Theology and an MDiv from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. Prior to serving the Council, he served as Senior Minister at First Congregational Church at Burlington, Vermont and The Plymouth Church at Framingham, Massachusetts and Pastor of St. John’s United Church of Christ in Waukegan, Illinois. Throughout his ministry, Peter has been a strong advocate for the development of affordable housing, leading to the Council’s Who Is My Neighbor

¹²⁷ 2022 *Mission Review Committee Report*, First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, NY. A copy can be found with the office of the Presbytery of New York City, New York, NY.

Community Development Initiative to help faith institutions use their property to better serve their community.¹²⁸

Rev. Philip Tom

Rev. Philip Tom occupies a unique role at the nexus of religious organizations and labor policy, putting groups varying from worker justice leagues to individual houses of worship in touch with one another, and helping them access appropriate government resources. President Barack Obama appointed him to the post of director on April 5, 2010. The center, formerly known as the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, was established as a part of the executive branch under President George W. Bush. Rev. Tom served as the Director of the Center for Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships in the Department of Labor during the Obama administration.

Originally born and raised in New York City, Rev. Tom earned a BA in Economics, then went to the University of Chicago to earn a Master's in Community Work. While in Chicago, he went on to seminary, then went into a variety of ministry support positions at the PCUSA headquarters, including Associate, Small Church & Community Ministry Office (1993-2010); and Associate, Urban Ministry Office, (2000-2005). He became the Director of the Community Development Corporation Program, Indianapolis Neighborhood Housing Partnership (1991-1993) and later the Pastor at Immanuel Presbyterian Church (1996-2000).

¹²⁸ New York State Council of Churches website: <https://www.nyscoc.org/about#our-staff> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

In a 1995 article Tom wrote for the National Housing Institute, he praised urban housing residents in his community who acted as their own advocates. In the article, Tom [okay to keep it as “Tom” here and onward?] voiced his belief that empowering community members to overcome drugs, crimes, and poverty in their own neighborhoods was a more successful tactic than bringing in agents from the outside. “Too often, staff and members of community, social service, or religious institutions create programs for the neighborhoods they serve without consulting or inviting neighborhood leaders to participate in the decision-making process.”¹²⁹

Rev. Benjamin Perry

Rev. Benjamin Perry is Minister of Outreach and Media Strategy at Middle Church. He also worked as an organizer with the New York chapter of the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, as Deputy Director of Communications and Marketing at Union Theological Seminary, and as an editor at Time Inc. He is the author of *Cry, Baby: Why Our Tears Matter*, which was published by Broadleaf Books in May of 2023.

An award-winning writer, his work focuses on the intersection of religion and politics. His writing can be found in outlets like *The Washington Post*, *Slate*, *The Huffington Post*, *Sojourners*, *Bustle* and *Motherboard*, and he has appeared

¹²⁹ Maggie Hyde, “Profile: Philip Tom,” *Madill News Service*, August 19, 2010, accessed online Sept 23, 2020, at <https://dc.medill.northwestern.edu/blog/2010/08/19/philip-tom-a-pastor-in-government/#sthash.BodHfWhz.dpbs>.

on MSNBC, Al Jazeera, and NY1. He holds a degree in psychology from SUNY Geneseo and a Master of Divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary.

He is married to Erin Mayer, and they live with his brother and best friend. He is the editor of the *Queer Faith* photojournalism series and helped curate an art exhibit by the same name. He is a passionate advocate for building Church that lives into God's blessed queerness. His two proudest achievements are skydiving with his grandmother and winning first prize in his seminary drag show.¹³⁰

Pastor Zac Martin

As Pastor of Justice and Outreach, Next Step Community Church of Brooklyn, Pastor Zac oversees Next Step's social outreach programs, including the food pantry, community breakfast, mother/baby ministry and more. Zac is an urban missionary who is particularly passionate about elevating the voices and struggles of the marginalized and cares deeply about how the gospel informs and empowers us in issues of justice and mercy. Zac is also a youth mentor, working with a number of public housing residences and high schools.¹³¹

Rev. Anna Taylor-Sweringen

¹³⁰ Middle Collegiate Church website, <https://www.middlechurch.org/rev-benjamin-perry/> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

¹³¹ Next Step Community Church website: <https://nextstepcc.org/about/> accessed Sept 23, 2023. PASTORZAC@NEXTSTEPCC.ORG

Michal Scott is the erotic romance pen name of Anna Taylor Sweringen, a retired United Church of Christ and Presbyterian Church USA minister. Inspired by the love mystics of Begijn, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, Rev. Anna writes erotica and erotic romance with a faith arc, hoping to build a bridge between the sacred and secular, spirituality and sexuality, erotica and Christ, you, and a well-written, spiritually stimulating, and erotically arousing story. She uses story settings to give insight into the African American experience in the US.¹³² As Board President of Parity NYC,¹³³ Rev. Taylor-Sweringen says, "I've been involved with Parity since 2008 and have served as chair of the Board of Visionaries. A longtime advocate, I have been active in the struggle for marriage equality and have been honored with a Parity Award. I was excited to be part of the visioning that turned Presbyterian Welcome into Parity because we wanted to become more diverse, expand ecumenically, grow geographically, and continue to strive for LGBTQIA advocacy and empowerment.

“Here's a little about me you might not learn when you Google me: A recovering born-again Evangelical, I'm an ordained United Church of Christ (UCC) minister and have full standing with the PCUSA. I've served churches in the Metro/Suffolk Association of the UCC, Presbytery of NYC, and Presbytery of the Palisades, and as an associate for Church Growth and Evangelism of the NYC

¹³² Long and Short Reviews website: <http://www.longandshortreviews.com/guest-blogs/winter-blogfest-michal-scott/> accessed Sept 23, 2023.

¹³³ Parity NYC is a faith-based organization committed to equity for LGBTQ persons - website: <https://parity.nyc/> accessed online January 9, 2024.

Conference of the UCC. All of us are grateful to you, Parity supporters, for all that you do to share in our goal of a world where LGBTQIA people may freely embrace their faith and gifts for leadership.”¹³⁴

Pastor Brunhilda “Sandy” Sanders-Lane

Commissioned Ruling Elder Brunhilda Sanders-Lane, affectionately known as Pastor Sandy-Lane, has a long history of public service. She retired from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) where she served for over twenty years as a Senior Attorney and as the Supervisory Attorney for the Eastern Region. Prior to joining the FAA, she worked for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as a Senior Attorney and as an Administrative Judge. She also worked for Bedford Stuyvesant Legal Services as an Attorney.

She retired from the FAA to attend New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) where she earned a Master of Divinity degree in 1993. She holds a bachelor’s degree from Columbia University, a Juris Doctor from Hofstra Law School, and a Certificate of Ministry from NYTS as well as a Lay Ministry Certificate from the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica Lay Institute.

Since becoming a member of First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica (FPCJ) in 1999, Pastor Sandy-Lane has shared her gift of public service with all those she encounters. Her desire to uphold and reflect the “purpose driven church” motto keeps her hands busy and her heart open to those who are seeking to experience the love of Christ. Her service to FPCJ included: Small Groups, Pastoral Care, the

¹³⁴ Parity website: <https://parity.nyc/anna> accessed Sept 23, 2023.

Scholarship Ministry, Sunday Adult Bible Study Class, the Clerk of Session, the David Fellowship Caring Circle as well as Elder to name a few.¹³⁵

Rev. Emily Brewer

. Brewer is the Interim Pastor at Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn. Rev. Brewer is “an imperfect practitioner of nonviolence who is inspired by people and movements committed to nonviolent social transformation.” She has been shaped by her upbringing in East Tennessee, a year of living in Guatemala, and—for the last decade—New York City. Emily is a “daughter, parent, spouse, sister, friend, and lover of the outdoors, coffee, and baked goods.”

Before coming to Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, Emily served as the Executive Director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship. She has degrees from Union Theological Seminary (MDiv 2015) and Maryville College (BA 2009).¹³⁶

I joined the staff of PPF in 2015, about a month after I graduated from seminary,” Rev. Brewer said in an email announcing her departure. Where some would have seen my idealism as immaturity, PPF celebrated that idealism and helped me hone it. To idealistic people of all ages and stages of life, PPF says,

¹³⁵ First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica website: <https://firstchurchjamaica.org/who-we-are/pastoral-team/> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

¹³⁶ First Presbyterian Church of the City of New York website: <https://fpcnyc.org/about/our-staff-and-officers> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

Oh, you think a world without war and violence is possible? So do we. Let's work together.'"

Rev. Brewer said PPF has "shown up in times and places where it mattered the most," including:

- Responding to the call and invitation from people experiencing violence at Standing Rock, in Colombia, at the U.S.-Mexico border, in Israel-Palestine and in Puerto Rico
- Responding to churches seeking to provide sanctuary to people, helping to turn guns into garden tools and "boldly proclaiming that war and militarism are inconsistent with the Gospel of Christ."
- Joining coalitions and movements calling for an end to racist and violent policing in the U.S.
- Partnering with those who call "upon all of us to stop profiting from fossil fuels and start investing our money and lives in sustainable ways of living."

PPF's Activist Council has tripled in size over the last seven years, Brewer noted. "What that tells me is that the Church and the world is hungry for what PPF is all about: taking seriously the Gospel call to 'love your neighbor' and

believing that loving each other means working so that each person can thrive; working for an end to systemic violence and the presence of real peace.”¹³⁷

Rev. Dr. Aqueelah Ligonde

Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde is an enthusiastic speaker and leader with a passion for today's generation of youth and women. Rev. Ligonde holds a Master of Divinity from McCormick Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry and a Certificate in Black Church Studies from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. In 2011, she was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and became a member of the Presbytery of New York City. Rev. Ligonde has worked with various organizations, institutions, and programs such as the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary, Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, Fuller Youth Institute, Urban Youth Workers Institute, Youth Specialties, Holmes Presbyterian Camp, PC (USA) Young Adult Volunteer Program, and GenOn/Logos Ministries, plus others. For over a decade, Rev. Ligonde served as Associate Pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, NY. Rev. Ligonde is an International Coaching Federation (ICF)-trained coach through the Coach Approach Skills Training program. She is a Consultant with Ministry Architects and the Vice President for Coaching and Training for

¹³⁷ Presbyterian Peace Fellowship website:
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/presbyterian-peace-fellowships-executive-director-stepping-down/> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

Ministry Incubators, organizations that are designed to champion congregations and leaders to help them live into their full ministry potential.¹³⁸

Interview Questionnaire

I interviewed each of the above pastors online via Zoom during the months of August and September, 2023, using the questions outlined below:

1. Please describe your experience with CBCO.

2. Please tell us about something that left a positive mark in you when you were organizing.

3. Please tell us about what worked as far as being effective with community organizing - what skills did you learn to use? How did you acquire those skills? What was the outcome?

¹³⁸ Ministry Architects website: <https://ministryarchitects.com/team-view/aqueelah-ligonde/> accessed online Sept 23, 2023.

4. Were there any situations that were less than positive in your community organizing experience? What were they? What made them less than positive?

5. What do you do well? What do you wish you could improve? Why?

6. Are there any tips you would like to pass on to other church volunteers as far as CBCO? What should they expect?

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

“If we do justice, we model Christ.” - Thomas A’ Kempis

“We change public opinion by public persuasion.” - Rev. Reginald Gundy

In this chapter, I will cover “the good,” or what works for CBCO; “the bad,” or what does NOT work for CBCO; “the future,” or where CBCO may lead churches, and I will summarize common points made in the interviews I held with clergy on the subject of CBCO.

The following interviews were conducted via Zoom over a two-month period, using the FPCFH Zoom meeting space. The meetings were very informal and lasted between one to one and a half hours per interview. Some of the interviewees I knew, and some were new to me, referred by someone I had talked to about this project. None of the interviewees received any compensation for the interview, and all freely and happily participated.

What follows are either quotes or paraphrases of interviews I had with eight pastors whose ministry is within the New York City area. Rev. Peter Cook, Rev. Emily Brewer, Rev. Phil Tom, Rev. Ben Perry, Pastor Sandy-Lane, Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde, Pastor Zac Martin, and Rev. Anna Taylor-Sweringen each had their own perspective

about “best practices” and “worst practices” as far as organizing churches. What follows are highlights from my interview with each of them about what works and what doesn’t.

The Good - What Works

In my interviews I asked each of the following ministers what they thought worked well from their experience in organizing churches. I heard common themes from many of them, the first being that CBCO is based on relationships. Relationships feed the organizing process for the whole congregation. Churches should create small groups to build relationships.

Second, I heard that it is important to partner people who know what they are doing to succeed. A professional organizer is helpful but expensive; try to partner with churches or organizations who are doing CBCO already. Don’t try it alone.

Third, church volunteers who have been trained in organizing are more successful than those volunteers who have not been trained. Organizations such as Metro IAF can train volunteers. If your church wants to be successful, it begins with training the right people.

Fourth, language is important. CBCO is based on a certain moral view. This moral view must be embraced by the congregation and preached by the pastor.

Fifth, Pastors must be leaders for CBCO to succeed. Pastors must be involved in CBCO, but pastors need to have members of her/his congregation with them. CBCO is not a solo pastor activity.

Sixth, some churches created a 501(c)3 nonprofit as a separate organization, because a separate organization can gain its own funding for organizing activities.

Lastly, activism can lead to organizing, but it is separate. Each is unique and has its own place. CBCO is focused on community, not a specific issue, and will ask the community what it needs and will listen to it. CBCO begins with listening.

Below are specific comments from the ministers I interviewed about what recommendations they have for churches wanting to do community organizing.

Rev. Peter Cook

Rev. Cook is a middle-aged white man, rather soft-spoken, who speaks deliberately and measuredly. I have known Peter for a few years from some organizing events he coordinated and I attended. He argued that community organizing is a subset of what churches do for social justice - it is not the only means of outreach. As he put it, relational building is foundational. Most congregations do some relational building, such as pastoral care, although pastoral care is often disconnected from social justice.

“Organizing can be a form of discipleship - finding the needs of other people and working to meet them, rather than having an agenda. Just pick something and start working on it, rather than talking about social justice or putting out signs in front of your church showing your support. There’s no such thing as a nonpolitical church. Include conversations about money and the building in your conversations on social justice. Social justice is part of ministry, for everything is social. Find the Christ in every relationship we see. You must go out into the community to see what the needs of the people are. When the pastor goes to do something, s/he should bring parishioners, and not go alone. It’s not just the work of the pastor.”

Rev. Emily Brewer

I had known Rev. Brewer when she was the Director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, but I did not know her background. I was surprised to learn of her history in Central America, because she does not appear to be the “activist” type. She is personable and pleasant, even when she is speaking about social justice. She speaks with conviction more than with pathos or anger. When she spoke about her disappointment in her home church not taking a stand on the Iraq war, it revealed a side not often seen in public, which revealed a certain compassion that guides her.

Rev. Brewer believes that activism is an entry point to organizing - organizing takes a longer time. Activism involves moments of influx, “big moments,” where it’s important to just have large numbers of participants. As she put it, sometimes events just happen, not as a result of agitating - congregations must seize the moment when such events occur. Saying no to injustice creates community, both intentionally and at times spontaneously.

She noted that creating joy is a form of resistance - we must leverage power and resources to show solidarity with the marginalized, creating joy in the process despite any circumstances to the contrary.

Rev. Brewer used the term “borrowed trust” in terms of organizing: borrowing trust is getting others to respond on the basis of existing relationships...trusting somebody who trusts somebody. This means that people show up for events not just because of the events themselves, but because others are attending those events, and those relationships compel us to attend. She said, “We show up for one another because of the relationships with those we trust.”

The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez spoke of being converted to the other. Rev. Brewer experienced this as a volunteer in Guatemala, when she asked community members who had lost their husbands to violence, “What can we do?” The Guatemala women replied, “You can go home to your country and tell them to get their boot off our necks.” This became a conversion experience for Rev. Brewer - she had not heard these stories and was used to seeing the U.S. as big-hearted and good, rather than exploitive.

Rev. Philip Tom

I met Rev. Tom while working with his wife, who is also a Presbyterian minister. Tom shared his story with me about growing up Buddhist and embracing the Christian faith through a liberal Presbyterian church in Iowa; their acceptance of him and respect for his Buddhist upbringing engaged him to explore Christianity more. He found their concern for social justice the most compelling reason to embrace their faith. He went from being baptized to going on to become an ordained Presbyterian minister himself. His parents are still Buddhists, and he is happy that they are well-grounded in their own faith tradition. Rev. Tom had the following to say:

“Organizing is based on relationships.” Having grown up Buddhist, Rev. Tom became a Christian because he found a Presbyterian church leader who offered him dinners. Rev. Tom has become one of the most well-known clergy in community organizing within the Presbyterian Church (USA) because from his experience, he sees that CBCO is about building the beloved community. CO is very much based on labor organizing, and churches should consider labor unions in their organizing. Rev. Tom

worked under the U.S. Department of Labor in the Obama Administration when he was engaging church-based organizations.

Rev, Tom stated that any attempt to organize a church needs buy-in from a congregation to be successful. CO is usually about working for policy change, which involves congregational expectations, such as, “if you join this church, you’re going to be involved in this community.” He added, “Don’t expect change from those unwilling to change.”

To build relationships, one-on-one meetings must be in person, visiting parishioners at home or at work. Virtual meetings are less successful in gaining agreement to participate in organizing.

Rev. Benjamin Perry

I got to know Rev. Perry by following him on social media, but I came to interview him by asking to interview the senior pastor of Middle Collegiate Church, Rev. Dr. Jaqui Lewis. When I spoke to Rev. Perry about interviewing Rev. Lewis, I discovered he was very involved in activism himself, so I asked him for an interview. During the course of our talk, I learned he was arrested on a NYC highway for stopping traffic in protest of George Floyd’s death at the hands of Minneapolis police officers. Rev. Perry is a young white man who identifies as LGBTQ.

Rev. Perry grew up Presbyterian but did not find it exciting. He attended Union Seminary, where he encountered James Cone and Cornell West, whose liberation theology led him to a new understanding of faith. He became excited about this new faith outlook with its new moral language. He now sees evangelism as a way to “put beautiful

things into the world to reframe the moral center.” He sees his ministry as working to expand humanity’s moral imagination. To him, CBCO “fights dystopian visions of the future with dreams of utopian community.”

As Rev. Perry sees it, organizing starts with the congregation, not with issues. It must start with education, moving people to consensus action. Advocacy work involves finding people to take action together. To become successful in organizing, a church should find a church that has changed because of its own organizing and talk to them - learn from them.

What works well is believing in people’s capacity to change - “they will surprise you.” Set reasonable goals which are not wildly different from who the congregation is already. Pursue diligently - don’t give up. Understand that this is a process which includes internal change.

Pastor Sandy-Lane

Pastor Sandy-Lane is a petite Hispanic middle-aged woman who was a lawyer and judge before she entered ministry. I met Pastor Sandy-Lane when she agreed to preach for the congregation of FPCFH while I was away on vacation. When we spoke, I found out she had been involved in church organizing for several years, doing community organizing for the First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica (FPCJ), under the guidance and leadership of senior pastor Rev. Patrick O’Connor. Rev. O’Connor had been involved with Metro IAF for many years before he asked Pastor Sandy-Lane to become involved. She became the lead organizer for FPCJ, transitioning from a career in law to becoming a lay pastor, currently serving another Presbyterian church in Queens.

As an attorney for 30 years and a political campaigner, Pastor Sandy-Lane became involved with organizing by conducting community surveys, inviting Latinx community leaders and business owners to get involved in the process of addressing community needs. The surveys she conducted identified housing, food, and health for immigrants as key issues. The surveys also found that flooding in South Jamaica was a big problem. Due to their community organizing, New York City public works funded projects to address the water run-off problem in Jamaica. FPCJ was instrumental in this success.

During the time she was involved in CBCO, FPCJ grew from 650 to 800 members and started a new Spanish-speaking congregation. Pastor Sandy-Lane attended courses at New York Theological Seminary and went on to earn a Master of Divinity degree from there.

Pastor Sandy-Lane said that FPCJ began doing their own community work and later asked Metro IAF to help them strengthen their resources. FPCJ created a separate 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, the First Jamaica Community and Urban Development Corporation (FJCUDC), to fund a mixed housing development.¹³⁹ FJCUDC has many programs for the community related to health, education, and housing. Women's issues are key for FPCJ, because most of the leaders and financial supporters of the church are women.

In 2018, Metro IAF organized an event to address the issue of affordable housing. Seven thousand people came to a meeting in Brooklyn to confront city council members

¹³⁹ “Located in the heart of Jamaica Queens, FJCUDC was founded in 1996 by the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica (FPCJ) to fulfill its vision of empowering people to take the next step into an improved and healthy life.” From its website: <https://fjcudc.org/> accessed online December 29, 2023.

and mayoral candidates. FPCJ filled several buses to come to the event. This was an example of how churches and community organizers can work together to address local issues.

Pastor Sandy-Lane explained that Metro IAF addresses “secular” issues and invites church members to participate. IAF organizers will give a minute for mission in church worship services, telling the congregation what organizing activities and events are occurring and inviting them to attend. FPCJ has had government agencies also come and speak in worship services - police, city departments, etc. This helps build community trust and holds government agencies and officials accountable.

When asked what works well in church organizing, Pastor Sandy-Lane said the pastor must be involved in community groups and should have relationships with community officials. Churches must have partnerships with city programs to help with serving the community, including courts, shelters, schools, and local businesses.

Her concluding advice was, “It is crucial to grow leaders in the church of all ages and genders. Leadership must be across the board. You have to train people to trust themselves to unburden the pastor.”

Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde

Pastor Sandy-Lane asked if I would like her to suggest other pastors to interview, which of course I was delighted to receive. Rev. Ligonde is a woman Sandy-Lane had known and worked with at FPC Jamaica for some time. Rev. Ligonde is a younger Black woman who has moved out to Long Island with her family recently and is no longer involved with FPC Jamaica, but she remembered participating in church organizing with

fondness. Our conversation was warm and engaging, and brought up the following points:

To Rev. Ligonde, CBCO recognizes that a church is situated in a community and makes an effort to make that community better. It gives church members a way to actively participate outside Sundays and Bible studies and see results from their efforts. CBCO sees the church as more than a place of worship - the church walks alongside the community.

In terms of best practices, “To be effective, you must have buy-in from the congregation. You must share the load with other churches - don’t do CBCO on your own. Partner with other organizations. Delegate. Don’t overextend yourself or the congregation.” She went on, “It is helpful to have an organizer working with the congregation, even if the organizer is shared with other churches. Don’t try CO without getting some expertise.”

Rev. Ligonde explained that CBCO is not community outreach. There is an ebb and flow between CBCO, community development, charity, and activism. Each has its time and place in the life of the church.¹⁴⁰

Rev. Anna Taylor-Sweringen -

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen is another woman Pastor Sandy-Lane suggested for me to interview for CBCO. She is an older Black pastor who has been “in the streets” for many years, originally protesting for civil rights. Like Pastor Sandy-Lane and Rev. Ligonde, she worked with Patrick O’Connor and Metro IAF at FPC Jamaica. Like Rev. Ligonde,

¹⁴⁰ This last point is consistent with my theory that Moyer’s MAP Model is helpful in understanding and creating effective CBCO strategies.

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen is no longer at FPCJ, but she is still active in organizing. She has a colorful background, having written semi-erotic romance novels that have sold rather well. She had the following comments, which I recorded during our online interview:

“Metro IAF’s philosophy: showing up is what’s important. If you show up with five people every time, you’re a leader.”

“There’s a difference between being organized and a movement.”

When I asked her how to be successful when organizing churches, she said, “What are the issues that are compelling people to come together? You have to go to where the people are showing up.” She went on, “It’s about relationships - that’s why things succeed. When we want something to happen, we’ve got people who will show up and it will happen.”

In terms of relating the church’s ministry to community organizing, Rev. Taylor-Sweringen explained that churches need to develop relationships that aren’t transactional, especially with people who use the building for community programs. Church leaders have to show the people of the community “that what’s motivating you to be in the streets comes from what you heard in the sanctuary.” This connects a certain theological outlook with organizing, as I mentioned earlier.

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen spoke from her experiences in organizing, stating that CBCO means education is a two-way relationship. “While church triumphalism makes compromise a bad word, a zero-sum mentality in relationships will lead to church decline. FDR was a master of political compromise - compromise is about mutuality. Win-win negotiating.”

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen's experience was obvious; she had participated in a lot of organizing over her lifetime. She spoke of the importance of one-on-ones - "listen to hear: what are the people's issues? They will tell you. This gives church members the tools to start having conversations with their neighbors. Like when you talk about bringing friends to church - how are you making friends? Where am I making new friends? What about the people who invite me to come to places? That's not happening."

On the role of evangelism, she said, "It's not about outreach; it's about helping people's lives be better, not about them coming into your tribe. The work of the church isn't to grow the church - it's to grow people's faith. There is a difference between growing impact vs. growing members. The shift has to be on growing our impact on the community and grow the community. It isn't about size, it's about impact, having an impact on the community."

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen said that once people saw that the church was genuinely interested in the neighborhood, there was growth, maybe not in membership, but in interaction, because the focus was outward. But like anything, people come to church because you invite them. Trust is the key to building community. "What grew was the awareness of the power of the church in the community."

"The Bad" - What Does *Not* Work

In the interviews, each interviewee was asked about what, in their opinion, hindered church organizing. Each had their own thoughts on what should be avoided when organizing a congregation. Here are some of their observations:

Many churches have more conservative members, which can threaten to derail organizing efforts. However, trying to be moderate does not work well in organizing - commitment to change is required. A church cannot expect results without hard work.

Organizing is not a solo sport - a church or pastor cannot do it alone. It will not work.

Don't expect your history to have anything to do with the present work. People do not consider what churches have done in the past these days, and looking backwards can be damaging to organizing efforts. Look forward to making change happen.

It's important to pick the right issue to address. Start with one - too many will lead to confusion and diffusion of energy. Pick something germane to the local community, which affects them. Don't go too big or you will fail. Rather than a large national or international issue, pick something close to home that people can get behind and spend their time on. Picking the wrong issue will not lead to a win, and wins are important.

The following are some of the specific comments I recorded from the interviews:

Rev. Peter Cook

When asked what to avoid in organizing churches, Rev. Cook observed, "Finding an issue to coalesce around can be limiting. Getting the congregation to make choices can be problematic - pick something. You can't figure out what that will be until you show up...I don't pick an issue - the issue finds me." Rev. Cook said the church must "develop the muscles to listen in community. Don't let this work be just the work of the pastor - it's the work of everyone."

Rev. Cook stated that a problem that can come up in organizing is “branding.” “There are large national organizing groups such Metro IAF or the Poor People’s Campaign that tend to focus on their brand, rather than collaborating with other organizations. A pitfall to avoid is letting political terms co-opt what the church is doing.”

Rev. Emily Brewer

When prompted to share pitfalls to avoid in organizing, Rev. Brewer, who is serving at a large NYC church, said, “Larger churches are pulled towards moderation in an attempt to be apolitical.” She shared that this alienates many of her generation - the refusal of Emily’s church to take a stand against the Iraq War led her to leave it. “Moderate is not moral high ground.”

Rev. Philip Tom

Rev. Tom addressed the financial difficulties of organizing a church. “Part of the funding problem is that larger churches tend to be more conservative. An organizer costs about \$100,000 a year. The less a congregation pays, the less they own.”

He also saw the difficulty of picking the right issue to address. “Unfortunately, issues can split coalitions, especially divisive issues which are national in scope.”

Rev. Benjamin Perry

Rev. Perry saw one of the limits of organizing is creating a national organization. This was seen during his work with the Poor People’s Campaign. “Local churches can be

engaged in local issues, but there are logistical problems creating a nationwide network.” He said that national organizations can work, but there are additional logistical hurdles scaling up.

He saw another limit in organizing is that many church members do not have the appetite for being in the streets. People who are drawn to religious communities often value stability, including in their political praxis. “However,” he continued, “there are no nonradical futures.”

When asked about what doesn’t work, Rev. Perry opined that churches should not try to start direct action before doing the groundwork. “Don’t go against the congregation’s situation - understand where they are. Don’t lie about who you are - be authentic. Don’t try to do all things, choose one thing, do it well - it relates to everything else.”

Pastor Sandy-Lane

On problems of organizing church, Pastor Sandy-Lane said, “I’m afraid a lot of our churches are closed to the community. Standards are set by the congregation that keep people out. The doors must be open.” She argued that church leaders must avoid having cliques in the church - “cliques exclude people and exclude ideas. Cliques must be avoided at all costs.”

Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde

When asked what to avoid when working to organize a church, Rev. Ligonde stated, “Don’t try organizing without getting some expertise. Don’t overextend yourself

or the congregation. It's harder to rally people without a professional organizer, but it's not impossible...Lumping community outreach, development, and organizing will not work together, but each are important, and the energy flows from one to another depending on the needs of the moment."

She also observed, "'Generation Z' is very cause-driven. I wonder if their causes are the causes the church is involved with."

Rev. Anna Taylor-Sweringen -

When asked about obstacles to organizing a church, Rev. Taylor-Sweringen said, "Churches operate as if they are the center of life in the community, like it was the turn of the century. What does the community know about your church? What does it know about you?" She further opined that people who don't have a relationship with your church don't think this way any longer, and there are other organizations to which they can turn instead of churches. "In 1920s, the Magill Building of FPCJ was a community center, with a movie theater, bowling alley, gym. All those have been replaced in the community."

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen sees a generational shift in church leadership on organizing. "Community organizing appealed to younger pastors, who thought there were still fights to be fought, even though many older pastors had organized and worked for civil rights."

Church leaders must put forth effort, or organizing cannot succeed. "You can't expect people to come to church and give you their time and money if you don't want to do the work."

The Future - “Where Do We Go from Here?” (Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)

What lies ahead for churches who are trying to organize to meet the needs of their community? How can we get there? When asked this question, here are some of the pastors’ answers:

Rev. Peter Cook

“How many parishioners are facing a social justice issue? What happened to a family whose son has just been put in jail? Or their grandparent put in a nursing home? Does the church speak about medical bills the family faces? Does the church care about the nursing home staff making poverty wages?” To Rev. Cook, genuine interest in social justice is a prerequisite for effective church organizing.

Rev. Emily Brewer

Rev. Brewer sees activism as an entry point to organizing, as organizing takes a longer time. Activism involves moments of influx, “big moments,” where it’s important to just have large numbers of participants.

Rev. Brewer suggested that “Momentum-style organizing,” such as in the book, *This Is an Uprising*, challenges the model of Alinsky-style organizing.¹⁴¹ She sees activism as having a real role in social change, in line with Bill Moyer’s model.

¹⁴¹ Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century*, Nation Books, 2016.

Rev. Philip Tom

Rev. Tom saw a distinction with churches that are issue-focused, such as Middle Collegiate Church, vs. community-focused. “The former is more social justice outreach; the latter is community organizing.” When asked to clarify, Rev. Tom explained that getting people into the streets to protest social injustice, while it may be significant and important, is not the same as organizing, and yields different results.

Rev. Benjamin Perry

Ben was ordained at Middle Collegiate Church into public theology, walking with the congregation and using the Bible to say, “This is what God demands.” In his view, making moral claims is part of CBCO.

Pastor Zac Martin -

Pastor Martin helped form Next Step Community Church,¹⁴² formerly Recovery House of Worship (originally First Baptist Church of Brooklyn). They work with Vocal NYC, an organization formed to advocate for social justice.¹⁴³ Pastor Zac created Trellis, a 501(c)3 to organize outside of churches.¹⁴⁴ Pastor Zac helped form Trellis, an asset-based community development corporation, to fund mutual aid groups. He sees these

¹⁴² <https://nextstepcc.org/>

¹⁴³ “Voices of Community Activists and Leaders (VOCAL-NY) is a statewide grassroots membership organization that builds power among low-income people directly impacted by HIV/AIDS, the drug war, mass incarceration, and homelessness. We accomplish this through community organizing, leadership development, advocacy, direct services, and direct action.” From their website: <https://www.vocal-ny.org/> accessed online December 27, 2023.

¹⁴⁴ “Trellis is a community development nonprofit that helps neighborhoods address injustice together.” From its website: <https://www.jointrellis.org/> accessed online December 27, 2023.

types of separate nonprofit organizations as important to community organizing, partly to increase community involvement, and partly to address the issue of funding, because churches are ineligible for certain grants.

Pastor Sandy-Lane

Pastor Sandy-Lane said that Caring circles - small groups of 10 or so that met in homes, prayed together, and talked about community issues - were the biggest cause of congregation growth at FPCJ. Organizing had a role, but there were also Bible studies paired to social issues, such as the role of women in society. Education is essential to succeeding.

Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde

Rev. Ligonde was trained on one-on-ones and leading a small group. As she put it, CBCO starts with one relationship and builds from there. In community organizing, small groups met from once a month to multiple times a month if there was a specific campaign. She spoke of how at FPCJ, Pentecost Sunday was dedicated to small groups under the rubric of organizing for a larger campaign.

Rev. Anna Taylor-Sweringen -

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen sees organizing in rather combative terms. As she put it, “The assault on communities is intentional. The anchors for community are no longer there.” The role of the church in organizing is to put those anchors back in place where they belong.

On organizing vs. activism, she asked, “How do you get people to show up to address the issue, not just draw attention to the issue?” Activism can draw attention to an issue, but without working to press for change, activism may fail to gain concrete results.

Rev. Taylor-Sweringen asked about the story in Acts 2:42, saying, “What if that was the model, where they had everything in common and gave to anyone who had need?” This presents a goal for organizing as a vision of a better future.

Summary of Common Themes

In these interviews, I heard common themes, such as that CBCO is based on relationships, starting with one-on-one discussions. Relationships feed the CBCO process, not only for the pastor, but for the whole congregation. From there, create small groups to build relationships.

Another observation is that it is important to partner with others to succeed. A professional organizer is optimal, but at the very least, partner with churches or organizations who are doing organizing and doing it well. Don’t try it alone. A pastor alone cannot effectively do this.

Several interviewees mentioned that training volunteers is important. Those church volunteers who have been trained in organizing skills are more successful than those volunteers who have not been trained. Organizations such as Metro IAF train volunteers, so if your church wants to be successful, it must start by training the right people.

Many interviewees said that language is important. CBCO is based on a certain moral view. This moral view must be embraced by the congregation and preached by the pastor.

Another common theme was that pastors must be leaders for CBCO to succeed. Pastors must be involved in the community and seen as leaders, but pastors need to have members of her/his congregation with them in CBCO events and actions. CBCO is not a solo pastor activity.

Some observed that creating a 501(c)3 non-profit as a separate organization can be helpful, more for community development than community organizing. However, a separate organization can gain its own funding for organizing activities.

Another common theme was that activism can lead to organizing, but it is separate. Each is unique and has its own place. CBCO is focused on community, not a specific issue, and will ask the community what it needs and will listen to it. CBCO begins with listening.

Proposed Action Timelines

I plan to integrate CBCO in my ministry at FPCFH in the following stages:

Congregants:

First Year - I plan to hold one-on-one interviews with current Ruling Elders to gain buy-in and uncover their personal social justice issues that are important to them. This will expand to all congregants and key members of the neighboring community over

time. From these interviews, we will begin holding small group discussion meetings about what changes we want to make happen in the lives of our community. This stage will include using the language of CBCO as a theology of community, from the pulpit and within “public” relationships.

Second year - I plan to develop internal leaders to grow the group by having them do one-one-one interviews themselves and lead small group discussions. From this, we will choose an agenda on which to take action and will begin researching the issue internally. We will discuss public action options available to take and execute an action plan. We will find other organizations working to address our agenda issue and seek collaboration with them.

Third year - I will work with and collaborate with other churches to teach this plan to them and have them join us in our events and planning.

Community:

First year - I plan to find key community leaders who already have a circle of followers with whom they have influence, and I will have one-on-one discussions with them for the purpose of recruiting them to join our efforts. I plan to educate them on the methodology and terminology of CBCO.

Second year - I plan to have community leaders suggest others to join our efforts and train these leaders to develop leaders themselves.

Third year - I plan to expand our influence by working with other community groups committed to change and transformation.

Church leadership:

First year - I plan to present CBCO as a methodology for church growth and transformation within the Presbytery of New York City. I plan to educate fellow pastors and congregational leaders on the terminology and methodology of CBCO and encourage them to begin using one-on-ones and small group meetings to develop a core group within their congregations.

Second year - I plan to find nearby churches who have begun using CBCO and plan joint actions or campaigns with them. I plan to share resources and education and make joint plans with leaders from multiple churches on single issue to address. I plan to reflect with them after taking joint action.

Third year - I plan on working to promote leaders from congregations using CBCO to positions of leadership within the presbytery. I plan to share the successes and research with other churches.

Accountability

Nothing happens unless we agree to hold ourselves accountable to someone else for our plans. To this end, I am sharing this plan with the Session (board of elders) at FPCFH, and with leadership within the Presbytery of New York City, some of whom are part of my site team.

CHAPTER 5 MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

This chapter will discuss skills I gained from this project, including conducting one-on-one interviews for CBCO, holding listening sessions for groups, and leadership development for organizing. These are related to the specific pastoral ministerial competencies of theologian, prophetic agent, and spiritual leader.

A minister is a *theologian*, someone who engages with the texts and traditions of the Christian faith to situate and explain that faith and its bearing in our world today. To engage in theology, a minister must listen to the voices of others: other theologians, church leaders, or people existentially engaged in living the mission and ministry of the church. Listening is connected to organizing, which links theology to *one-on-one conversations*. If theology is to reflect what a minister learns about God and the world, then listening to people living in this world and their concerns becomes a theological exercise.

A minister is a *prophetic agent*, a person who speaks truth to power. However, if the only voices that speak are the voices of the privileged, then a minister's speech is that much less prophetic. To speak prophetically requires lifting the voices of the marginalized, those whose voices are rarely heard. To encourage those marginalized voices to speak their own truth to power comes from listening sessions, where those truths are told to others facing similar circumstances. From *listening sessions* come

voices raised in solidarity against oppression. Listening sessions, a CBCO skill, gives rise to prophetic speech by the marginalized themselves.

A minister is a *spiritual leader*, and leaders build leaders. Leadership is shown in organizing by encouraging others to take the lead and develop followers, thereby multiplying the effectiveness of the organization and the church. As ministers teach others organizational skills, they show their own leadership and set an example themselves in *leadership development*.

Theologian - One on One Conversations

If a public theologian is one who engages in Biblical study and theological reflection in the context of the contemporary world, how does a pastor do this in order to become more effective in interpreting the word in a particular time and place? The pastor must learn to listen.

Theology begins with listening, as does organizing a church. We must learn to listen, not interrupting, not thinking about our own response or our own thoughts, but actively trying to see the world from a point of view not our own. To listen, we must begin by setting aside our own ideas of how things are and try to learn, as if for the first time, what it means to see the world differently. We must allow another world to enter our own consciousness, without judgment, without prejudice, without evaluation. We must listen first.

Theology involves a relational understanding of the divine, who God is in this moment, with issues we as humans face in our daily lives. For theology to make a

difference in the world, it must be related to our existential situation, our lives as they are, not merely an abstraction or theory of another world not connected to this one.

We see this in stories of God in relationships with humans in scripture, such as God talking to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, or God speaking to Moses directly, or God speaking to the prophet Elijah, and Jesus speaking to God, addressing God as “Father.” In the story of Abraham binding his son Isaac to be a sacrifice to God, God speaks to Abraham. While these stories are legends and do not tell us how God spoke, they communicate the idea that the divine has means of communicating with human beings in human daily living, and that *dialogue* is how we come to know God and understand who God is and what God wants for us. In each of these stories, human beings listened, and listening became a spiritual practice.

In a pastoral context, doing theology involves dialogue: dialogue with oneself, with the Holy Spirit, and with other people in their own relationships with themselves and the Spirit. All of this comes into play when we have dialogue with other people and discover our divine purposes together. In church organizing, this is uncovered in one-on-one relationships. Deep listening reveals the depth of spirit both in ourselves and in others. It is holy work. By asking church members to tell their own stories and listen to the stories and interests of others, a church leader can invite theological reflection into the storytelling, connecting the members’ own stories to those found in scripture. This in turn connects them to God by seeing their own stories as sacred.

Organizing is about developing relationships which then take action together to attempt to change the way things are into the way things should be. Of course, what the way things should be is rather subjective, but then, we are all subjects of our own world,

with our personal idiosyncratic points of view. None of us see the world the same way, so each outlook is unique, personal, and subjective.

We must begin with this reality, which means we must learn to listen to one another to discover how the other person sees the world and translate that into our own thinking. We cannot get an exact replication of another person's point of view, for we cannot get "inside their head," seeing the world from their eyes, hearing from their ears, but we can get a proximate view by listening intently and imagining the world from their perspective. From this exercise, we gain a level of empathy and understanding with which we can understand one another's priorities and form agreements to act together.

This is the beginning of forming a public relationship which may then later lead to solidarity and organized action. This kind of listening generates trust, which is the foundation of working together. Listening deeply allows the other person to feel heard, understood, and accepted. This creates bonds of solidarity, if not friendship.

I have commented several times in sermons about street gangs and human relationships. I spent many years in suburban Chicago, and news of gang activity was constant. Almost every day there would be a gang-related shooting or other gang violence. Yet young men (and too often young women) would still be recruited into gangs, where they would face violence, the probability of arrest and time in jail, and even the possibility of death. Joining a gang seems absurd to those who have other options and possibilities.

I would ask the congregation, "Why would anyone join a gang?" I would then answer my rhetorical question, "Because in a gang a person finds two things everybody longs to find: acceptance and belonging. It doesn't matter who you are, how smart you

are, what you look like, how much money you have, if you want to join, you belong. You are accepted as you are, and you are protected from the rest of the world.” I then comment, “If churches were like this, our pews would be filled.”

Listening conveys acceptance, which leads to belonging. Humans long for these two things. The one-on-one interview is the first step in creating this.

A one-on-one interview can take place anywhere - in a house, in a coffee shop, in a church basement, in a school classroom, anywhere you have an hour without interruption where you can engage in deep discussion. To be heard, there must be no outside distractions.

A one-on-one interview must be planned. It is a scheduled event, with both parties understanding that this will be an exchange of personal ideas about what matters to the person. Unlike a therapy session, where one person listens to uncover subconscious motivations and process emotions, a one-on-one interview is concerned with those things the person already knows and is concerned about. This conversation is not about deep secrets or personal confidential information - it is a “public” relationship, revolving around concerns such as economics, family situations, community support, or structural difficulties in the world with which the person is confronting. It is focused on the way things are which concerns her/him.

Beginning with how things are, the interviewer asks what changes the person wants to see, and why. What values are driving this desire for change? What is the future the person would like to see? Why? How would these changes affect her/him and/or those she/he loves?

While this conversation is public, it is also personal. It brings out personal drives, desires, and longings. Such conversations are based on the unspoken assumption that most humans desire justice, fairness, and wholeness in their lives, the lives of those dear to them, and even the lives of people they do not know. One-on-one interviews focus on discovering shared values with which people can work together towards making change happen in society. These values reflect theological concerns, because questions of goodness, mercy, compassion, trust, and love are God-related, as God is the ground of these things. This is what makes these conversations a form of “doing theology” - seeing God in the context of our lives and values, even if not explicitly stated.

In the course of my research, I have engaged in many one-on-one interviews. It is a skill I am still learning, but I have developed a listening ear. This listening is different from the empathic listening of pastoral care or counseling, for pastoral care has no active agenda, other than to support the spiritual needs of a person. One-on-one interviews have an agenda: to engage the other person to join a group committed to making change happen.

Towards the end of an interview, the interviewer will ask the other person if she/he would be willing to work with others to address the problem(s) they are facing. It is an invitation to join an organization. In organizing terms, it is an “ask.” A request is made, with an expectation to accept or decline.

This is rather close to the evangelical understanding of responding to the Gospel. When an evangelist asks her/his hearers to respond by committing or becoming part of the church, there is a response, an acceptance or rejection. (Of course, like evangelism, an initial rejection can later become an acceptance, too.). This is a call for some level of

commitment - attend a small group meeting, to learn more, join a discussion, meet again, participate in some public action, etc. There is an expectation that the person is able to respond, and that there is a good reason for her/him to do so.

In community organizing terms, each interviewee is motivated by self-interest. When an interviewer asks a person at the end of the one-on-one interview to take another step, it is because the interviewer has uncovered some issue or problem the person wants to address and connects that to participating in the organization to address it. In Christian terms, though, at times the self-interest is more from an *enlightened* self-interest, for the interviewee may be in a position of relative privilege, and their apparent self-interest may seem to be counter to acting with those at the margins. In these cases, appealing to self-interest is an appeal to the person's desire for justice or sense of compassion, or similar values.

Listening deeply in the interview involves understanding that this "ask" will take place at some time during the interview (most often near the end). The interviewer knows this will be the point of the entire conversation but wants the other person to see for her/himself the connection between his/her values and taking action with others. This must come from within - the interviewer cannot place it in the other person. There must be an internal motivation - this is what the interviewer is seeking to uncover.

While this may seem, to an outside observer, to be a bit manipulative, the interviewer is doing this not for personal gain from the other person. The interviewer represents the organization and the process of transformation and change that occurs by taking corporate action with that organization. The interviewer is looking for persons

with whom they will stand in solidarity. The interviewer is uncovering values which they may have in common.

Community organizing is based on these shared values, and the understanding that those who are working together are working for the good of each of them, individually and together. Without this understanding, community organizing makes no sense, and is doomed to fail.

In CBCO, one-on-one interviews will very often begin with the pastor, even when a professional community organizer is working with a congregation. As a person in a position of spiritual leadership, it is natural for the pastor to do this. During initial organizing, the pastor will build strong relationships with each congregant who is interviewed, especially if the church member decides to participate in organizing. (For those who may be hesitant to get involved, there will be later opportunities, and the pastor will still be in a better position to minister to that person's needs in the church.)

CBCO involves the pastor, but it must expand beyond the pastor to become successful in building an organization. Individual church members must learn to schedule and conduct one-on-one interviews themselves to grow the organization. In this respect, organizing is again like evangelism.

Prophetic Agent - Listening Sessions

As a prophet, a minister is called to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), communicating an awareness of social injustices that can sensitize others to the spiritual and ethical implications of various structures and practices in the church and in their wider society. This is seen in the liberation theology model of action-reflection-action,

where listening leads to action. Action is speech, speaking truth to power, but without reflection, there is no truth to speak to power. Listening sessions bring truth to the fore by raising the voices to those who are rarely heard, first by giving those voices a platform in a trusted environment with others who have similar concerns and issues.

The goal of CBCO is transformation - that is its entire purpose. CBCO is about making change happen, righting wrongs of social injustice by group action and confrontation. As praxis, CBCO becomes prophetic action collectively. Listening sessions are the beginning point, where the liberation cycle of action-reflection-action begins.

CBCO does not have an agenda outside liberation of the marginalized. The public actions taken by the church are oriented towards speaking truth to power and calling for change. This process may be led by individuals, but it is sustained by a multitude of leaders who have been trained to lead others, who have previously taken some form of direct action to change their own situations. CBCO gives voice and power to those who are voiceless and powerless, to confront those in power, those who can give freedom to those who demand it in the name of justice.

CBCO is less interested in theoretical knowledge than in creating actual and lasting social change by using group power dynamics. It is continually focused on lifting up those who are facing injustice until there is no injustice to be found. It begins with one's self, understanding one's own social location, power, and privilege, as well as one's own interests and one's disadvantages. Its goal is equality, where "every valley is lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low" (Isaiah 40:4), where those who mourn are comforted (Matthew 5:4).

While social justice leaders may become well known, CBCO is not focused on speaking through one voice - it elevates the voices of many people together who gather to speak as one. Rather than the voice of a single leader, the prophetic voice of CBCO is focused on the corporate voice of the church, assembled together to speak out against injustice.

Listening sessions are a part of CBCO entailing small groups who gather together to speak out about a concern or issue to each other. These are an extension of one-on-one discussions but are also something quite separate. Listening sessions can be part of regular small group meetings or can be stand-alone get-togethers.

Like one-on-one interviews, listening sessions are not about promoting a specific agenda or accomplishing a specific task. Rather, the task of a listening session is to listen, to hear, to allow people to speak and be heard about something in their lives they face, or a specific topic or common obstacle faced by others. Listening groups are about discernment.

In a typical listening session, a moderator will raise a topic, such as fair treatment in the workplace, and then invite others to speak and share their experiences and concerns. Everyone will listen and be given an opportunity to speak. Once everyone has spoken, everyone is given another chance to talk more, or ask questions, or raise additional points or concerns. The point is to get everything out on the table, so to speak.

Listening sessions are not necessarily designed to solve problems. In fact, they may raise other related problems instead of solving them. The intent is to have a group of people realize they have a common problem they are facing. Like one-on-one interviews,

listening sessions will often have a call to response at the end, an “ask” for those who are present to agree to work together to address their shared concern.

In a listening session, one discovers that others have the same problem as they have, and realizes one is not alone in facing this problem. Once one sees she/he has others facing the same issue, they feel less alone, which can lead to feeling the others may be able to help challenge whatever has created the unjust situation.

As an example, the congregation of FPCFH held two listening sessions to determine what the mission and ministry of their church should be. Church members spoke about their concerns over dwindling attendance, what programs had given them support in the past, and how they felt about the shrinking influence of churches today. While no specific plans were made about addressing these concerns, those who participated realized their concerns were shared by other church members, and that there was a need for change - the status quo was not sustainable. Relying on past programs and practices would not improve the situation.

These listening sessions are part of the overall mission and ministry of FPCFH. By gathering together and asking people to speak and share their experiences, we hear the leading of the Spirit for where our energy may be needed most. Change requires listening.

These listening sessions began with three questions about how those present came to be part of the church, what it meant to them to be members, and what they each thought was the mission and ministry of FPCFH. Attendees were invited to write their thoughts on a large sheet of paper on their table after the discussion.

These listening sessions were attended by a dozen active church members - this comprised almost one half of regular Sunday worship attendance. Follow-up sessions will be scheduled later.

While listening sessions do not create solutions to a problem, they help clarify the problem itself. With such clarification, a group can research possible solutions and advocate for change.

Spiritual Leadership - Leadership Development

Pastors are spiritual leaders for their congregations. To effectively lead, pastors must develop other leaders to multiply their ministry and develop the ministry of others. There is too much work to be done in ministry for pastors to try to do everything alone. Besides this, it is unscriptural and poor leadership to not develop the leadership of others.

Spiritual Leadership is about more than simply leading - leadership builds more leaders. In the examples of scripture, those who followed the leadership of others became leaders themselves. Joshua, the faithful servant of Moses, led the Israelites into Canaan when Moses was gone, and the disciples of Jesus became apostles, leaders of the early Church after Jesus left. Paul appointed elders in churches in Asia Minor who had accompanied him on his missionary journeys to lead the congregations he created. Without building leaders to pick up what has been started, the process of transformation ends when leaders exit.

A large part of CBCO is building leaders who will grow the organization and get more people to follow and be engaged themselves. Movements grow not so much from one prophetic voice as much as from many.

Spiritual leadership involves listening, not simply directing others. Leadership then requires discernment, knowing what can work. Leadership is built on creating success and learning from it. Leaders learn their lessons and carry them forward. CBCO creates leaders by working together, elevating those who normally would be marginalized to use their own voice to inspire others to follow and act with them. Without this, CBCO ultimately fails.

CBCO specifically lifts up the voices of the marginalized to speak on their own behalf, with others standing in solidarity with them. Leadership in CBCO is not “top-down,” but is rather “bottom-up” - those who are facing oppression, discrimination, subjugation, or systemic marginalization are the ones who “take the mic,” so to speak. The organization puts their face and voice out front, to call attention to those who are unheard and make people listen to them.

Because CBCO is “bottom-up,” rather than hierarchical, it puts those at the bottom in leadership to bring change. The change they seek is to help themselves; their partners in praxis are sisters and brothers in transforming the world. Leadership is not confined to the pastor, or to clergy - in CBCO, anyone can lead, especially the marginalized.

Thus, pastors and organizers will do well to teach lay people to become CBCO leaders and conduct one-on-one interviews. As the organizing grows, the role of the pastor will become less central, and more representative for the organization. A pastor cannot bring about change by herself/himself. Short of superhuman or supernatural abilities, one person cannot change the structure of a society. It is difficult enough for most pastors to transform themselves, let alone a community. The work is more than one person can accomplish, therefore, other leaders must be encouraged and developed.

Leadership in CBCO can be defined as teaching others how to perform the tasks of organizing, such as conducting one-on-one interviews and leading listening sessions. After others are taught these skills, they are then able to help grow the organization by using these skills to recruit others into the organization. Leadership development requires church leaders to learn the skills that will be taught to others. Before one can teach leadership, one must become a leader oneself.

We too often confuse leadership with personality traits such as confidence or having strong opinions. These are not leadership traits. Leaders are not necessarily charismatic personalities (although leaders may be charismatic) - leaders are simply people with followers. The easiest way to gain followers is by forming relationships of trust with other people. Knowing how to use the skills of CBCO can lead to relationships of trust, resulting in having followers. From this understanding, leadership is about using a process to develop a team of people who care about a common cause and one another.

We see this in Jesus' own ministry. He teaches his disciples to do what they see him doing, and then sends them out to do what he has done (Matthew 10:1-10). He expects them to be able to do this, even though he often reprimands them for a lack of belief. The gospel stories tell us that these disciples were able to do what Jesus was doing, including amazing things like healings.

The Apostle Paul similarly trained others to do what he was doing. Timothy and Titus specifically are examples of leaders Paul developed by teaching them to do what he was doing. Organizing involves passing on a method of organizational growth.

In churches, we too often think of church leadership as theological training. While theological training is part of spiritual leadership, it is not a large part of CBCO.

Anyone can help organize, so anyone can be a leader. This is an empowering part of CBCO - anyone can lead.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS

Where will Church-Based Community Organizing lead us? This chapter explores the future potential for CBCO, looking at the MAP model as it is applied to churches, the limits of this study, future research suggested for CBCO, and the next steps for where we go from here.

MAP Model Applied to Churches and CBCO

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan (MAP) provides a model for roles individuals play within social movements, including Activists and Organizers. At times in past social movements, there has been antagonism, lack of coordination, and even open hostility between these two roles. I see each of these roles as complementary and needed for the progress of social justice, which my interviews bore out.

In the interviews, churches move between community organizing, community development and charitable operations, almost interchangeably. Having a variety of ways to serve and engage members of the congregation and community strengthens the church and gives church and community members means to climb the "ladder of engagement" described by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship in Chapter Three. A church or community member can become involved as a helper at a food pantry, then become more

involved with community development, and may even engage in protest events with other church members. This can lead to community organizing and further leadership roles. None of these are mutually exclusive, and all are positive and go towards social justice.

The Presbyterian Peace Fellowship's "Ladder of Engagement" provides a tool for involving nonmembers in increasing levels of involvement and organizing. As Alex Weisendanger points out, beginning with simple steps such as writing letters or attending listening sessions is a low-commitment on-ramp leading (hopefully) to increasing levels of commitment and engagement. Individuals can start with helping in acts of charity, which can later lead to getting involved with organized campaigns to change the status quo.

The ladder of engagement must build relationships between members of the community and volunteers. Relationships build commitment - we make commitments to people we know and trust, not to people we do not know and trust. We only come to know and trust others by spending time talking to them and working with them, seeing them engaged. As we see them working towards something we ourselves care about, we are much more likely to commit to supporting their efforts, particularly when the work is directed to something important to us.

I have a church member who is concerned about issues affecting the LGBTQ community. (This woman had several of her friends die of AIDS years ago.) From her concern, she has marched in the Queens Pride parade with our church. From this engagement, she agreed to march in the March Against Fossil Fuels in New York City months later. Her seeing church members as allies for her cause motivated her to

reciprocate by being an ally for their cause, in this case, addressing global warming.

Members of the community who are not church members also participated in both events, increasing the visibility and reputation of the church in the eyes of many of its neighbors.

FPCFH has held listening sessions as well which have created opportunities for church members to be engaged and express their concerns and passions. These listening sessions create a space for church members to go beyond the normal conversations about church and family matters and engage in conversations about things that matter deeply to them. Expressing their own concerns and hearing the concerns of others builds understanding, which can later be a motivation to act with them to address common concerns.

These get-togethers can create a paradigm shift¹⁴⁵ of a congregation's self-image, from being a group that meets weekly in a common space for worship to a group that takes action at times to address social justice concerns together. Although worship will likely remain a part of the congregation's identity, it is not its sole identity or purpose - the vision of the congregation of what "being church" means expands as more and more members become involved in organizing and acting together to transform society.

A large part of organizing is addressing the imbalance of power. In almost every developed society, power is held closely by a powerful and advantaged few, resulting in the majority of people in that society feeling they are powerless. Organizing a

¹⁴⁵ *Miriam Webster*: **paradigm shift**: "an important change that happens when the usual way of thinking about or doing something is replaced by a new and different way" <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradigm%20shift#:~:text=%3A%20an%20important%20change%20that%20happens,in%20our%20understanding%20of%20evolution>. Accessed online January 8, 2024. See related article by Tania Lomrozo: "What Is a Paradigm Shift Anyway?" *NPR*, July 18, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/07/18/486487713/what-is-a-paradigm-shift-anyway#:~:text=Accordingly%2C%20a%20paradigm%20shift%20is,seem%20intuitive%20rather%20than%20technical>. Accessed online January 8, 2024.

congregation challenges that by offering an alternative vision of less powerful individuals working together, committed to changing some aspect of the status quo by their actions. The church sees itself as powerful, not as an institution for the rich and privileged, but as an organization that empowers the marginalized by acts of solidarity which lead to change. In opposition to power that oppresses others, church power is decentralized and involves nonviolent resistance to those who hold political or economic power. In this capacity, church power includes demanding change.

Church leaders must become comfortable challenging power and recruiting others to join them to create power that challenges power. Group actions such as boycotts, strikes, demonstrations, and publicly calling for change will make many church people uncomfortable, especially those with any measure of privilege. Such tactics must use the language of the Bible to point out the theological basis and historic roots for social justice; indeed, this is the only reason churches should be involved in community organizing. Pastors and leaders must use scripture and quotes from well-known exemplary Christians to urge those who are uncomfortable to reframe their thinking, to “renew their minds” as the Apostle Paul puts it (Romans 12:1) to find their place in organizing.¹⁴⁶ Organizing builds an organization, and churches must understand how organizing builds their own organization, and how getting involved in CBCO will change their church. Churches that are involved in organizing will no longer simply be passive spaces for quiet worship services...they will become engines of transformation. Worship services can involve sharing plans for action and recruiting others to join and participate. God is seen in solidarity with the marginalized, rather than an “unmoved mover” who

¹⁴⁶ The Greek term Paul used, μεταμορφοῦσθε, is the source of our word “metamorphosis.” In the Greek, its literal meaning is transformation.

impassively watches and judges us. God must be seen as concerned and involved in the process of transformation. Unless this connection is made, churches that attempt community organizing will fall short.

Coupled with a church-specific vocabulary, church members can find a specific social justice interest that they feel calls for their attention, then can have conversations with CBCO leaders who can suggest house meetings they can attend. At a house meeting, a leader can suggest a neighborhood canvassing to recruit community members, which can lead to more people becoming engaged. With engaged people researching issues, the church can find ways to call for changes that will lead to liberation for those who are marginalized.

Based on my and other ethnographic research, we find that churches that engage in CBCO tend to develop closer relationships between parishioners and community members. This often leads to nonchurch members attending church services, but not always, and not in dramatic numbers. However, the community feels the church understands their needs, and community members feel more connected to their local church when it is doing CBCO. Moreover, church members themselves feel a sense of their faith making a difference in the world and in their lives. CBCO creates a sense of purpose, with meaningful activity which can transform the community.

While some church members will engage in community organizing, having discussions on social justice issues may encourage other members to engage in activism more than organizing. This can be seen in a positive light, as activism brings attention to social injustices, and organizing can bring community pressure to bear on those who can solve them (i.e., politicians, businesses, etc.). Still others may want to simply help with

charity programs or advocacy work. All of these should be encouraged, and none should be discouraged, for each role addresses social justice in different ways.

CBCO succeeds most when church leaders are trained in its techniques and methods. Partnerships with organizations such as Metro IAF can develop important skills for making a stronger impact in the local community, but churches can also simply learn by doing, by trial and error, and discover the issues and tactics that work best for them.

Limits of This Research

This study is limited to interviews of pastors in the New York City area, who have done different kinds of organizing with different results. The findings of another geographic area may have different results: rural and/or suburban churches may be more resistant to the concept of CBCO than urban churches. Issues affecting these churches will also likely be different.

This study also did not investigate community organizing as an interfaith model. Some of the literature covered interfaith models, which would have added another dimension and some theological questions to query which this paper did not address. It may be the case that interfaith community organizing is even more helpful to organizing efforts and may increase the spiritual growth of church members, or we may find the opposite to be true.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ “Expanding beyond the black Protestant, liberal/moderate Protestant, and Roman Catholic core of traditional organizing culture brings wider credibility, new ethical insight, new constituencies, and greater diversity into the organizing world, but it must be undertaken in ways that sustain the flow of commitment and motivation within organizing. If faith-based organizing accomplishes this, it will have a great deal to teach the wider political culture about appropriately combining faith and politics across the

Also, interviewing lay persons who have led or been involved with CBCO may have expanded the findings as well. This paper interviewed church leaders who are trained as clergy, which brings a certain theological lens to their organizing strategies and understanding. Related to this is the fact that the clergy interviewed were primarily Protestant Reformed traditions such as Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and related denominations; if the researcher interviewed Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, or other denominational church leaders, the responses may have been different. Future researchers may want to include lay leaders and a broader section of Christian denominations, as well as non-Christian congregations involved in community organizing.

This research did not include interviews from community organizers themselves, who also would likely have had different comments. While community organizers such as Alex Weisendanger were used as consultants for this research, none were interviewed. Having their experiences and “best practices” chronicled could have increased the findings of this paper.

Future research should focus on what it means to *all* church members to be involved in community organizing. Organizers, too, have a unique perspective as persons of faith who are engaged in organizing. Their voices are needed to more fully explore CBCO. Future research, including all these voices, would increase the validity and breadth of the findings, and possibly corroborate them. As churches find their models of ministry and mission changing over time, this research should be expanded and continue.

religious spectrum of contemporary American society.” Mark. R. Warren and Richard L. Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field*, Interfaith Funders, Jericho, NY, 2001. <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers.htm> Accessed online December 15, 2003.

Opportunities for Future Research

A similar study to this may find different results in different settings, such as in rural America or in suburban churches, as stated previously. Without such research, church leaders can only guess as to the efficacy of organizing churches there. Rural and suburban churches that are declining should strongly consider CBCO in these environments.

Some of the literature on CBCO suggests that interfaith organizing is vibrant and growing and can add a completely different dimension to participating churches. Organizations such as Interfaith America,¹⁴⁸ formed by Eboo Patel from his Interfaith Youth Core, are seeing growth and engagement, and may stimulate growth of participating congregations. Power Interfaith is a similar organization based in Philadelphia.¹⁴⁹ Although this paper did not address such organizations, it may be the case that interfaith community organizing is even more helpful to church organizing efforts and may increase the spiritual growth of church members.¹⁵⁰

Quantitative sampling may also add to future CBCO research. Questions such as “how many members of the congregation participated,” “how many people began

¹⁴⁸ Interfaith America, <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/events/faith-organizing/> accessed online January 2, 2024. Interfaith Youth Core, founded in 2002, was created in Chicago to give young adults opportunities to work in interfaith groups doing community service together to promote peace and acceptance between religions. Patel, a Muslim, felt the need to address a growing religious intolerance in his native America, and created his organization to address that need. Interfaith Youth Core last year was renamed and now includes community organizing with service opportunities. Patel is the author of *Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, The Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*, Beacon Press, 2010.

¹⁴⁹ <https://powerinterfaith.org/community-organizing-model/> accessed online January 2, 2024.

¹⁵⁰ Mark. R. Warren and Richard L. Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field*, Interfaith Funders, Jericho, NY, 2001. <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers.htm> Accessed online December 15, 2023.

attending services or programs after CBCO began,” “how were church finances affected before and after CBCO” would have been useful to this study, but many of the interviewees did not have access to this information, and therefore, this data could not be included. Quantitative data would more fully support the conclusions of this research or may suggest other factors not considered here. Future research could be broader and include more voices and more quantitative data.

Next Steps - Where Do We Go from Here?

The time is well past when churches can sit with a building on the corner and wait for visitors to fill the seats. People today walk by empty church buildings without any thought of finding out what goes on inside, and as a result, congregations today are dying out. Without some means of showing the community what the church cares about, communities often feel that churches do not care about them.

Churches are not merely in decline - many are in freefall. Fewer and fewer Americans are bothered to attend church today,¹⁵¹ which indicates churches need to consider new approaches to engaging their communities in their mission and ministry. Without a new approach, many churches will likely close their doors.

Many conservative churches actively evangelize their neighborhoods, which may help bring new visitors into their worship services. However, churches that do not share

¹⁵¹ “Some 40 million American adults once went to church but have [stopped going](#), mostly in the last quarter-century. ‘More people have left the church in the last 25 years than all the new people who became Christians from the First Great Awakening, Second Great Awakening and Billy Graham crusades combined,’ Davis and Graham write.” Nicholas Kristof, “America Is Losing Religious Faith,” *New York Times*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/23/opinion/christianity-america-religion-secular.html> accessed online December 15, 2023.

a conservative theology of salvation may not feel they have a reason to go door-to-door to talk to neighbors. CBCO gives these churches a vocabulary and a reason to do so: social justice. This type of evangelizing (“canvassing” in CBCO terminology) is an invitation to become involved in making society better by calling for change. It is an opportunity to do something related to the values of the faith proclaimed from the pulpit - it puts that faith into action in the streets.

Many churches and faith leaders have already done this. They are our models. There are new organizations that are doing this now. They are our partners. There are millions of young Americans participating in community organizing. They are the future of the church, and they want to change the world. As *Philanthropy Daily* puts it,

Young people value causes over specific organizations. They want to be involved in eradicating global poverty, combating human trafficking, or cleaning up a local watershed. It is not just about joining the Kiwanis Club or the Elks Lodge. While previous generations joined clubs and organizations first, and only then discovered ways to serve, today's young Americans see a problem first and then look for a way to solve it.¹⁵²

If the church cannot engage this generation, the church will die out when its current members pass away.

Younger Americans in particular are looking for ways to make a difference.¹⁵³ Perhaps their diffidence on attending church is their way of saying today's church

¹⁵² Hans Zeiger, “Millennials: The Next Civic Generation,” *Philanthropy Daily*, July 31, 2013, <https://philanthropydaily.com/millennials-the-next-civic-generation/> accessed online December 15, 2023.

¹⁵³ In a recent survey, 63% of millennials—essentially workers under 35—said the primary purpose of businesses should be “improving society” instead of “generating profit.” Daniel Goleman, “Millennial: The Purpose Generation,” Korn Ferry Institute, 2023, <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/millennials-purpose-generation> accessed online December 15, 2023.

doesn't, that churches do not appear to make a difference in their communities. Churches need to change that perception through engagement and action. Older churchgoers must get involved alongside younger people to organize and make their communities better, or the younger people will simply do it themselves, outside of the church, leaving the church behind, as we see them doing now.

The time has come for churches to get organized and put their faith into action. How can churches do this?

The first step is listening. One person at a time, one conversation at a time, one issue at a time - step by step, churches can begin making a difference in their communities, engage their members, and invite the community to become involved in a process of transformation.

Small churches have the advantage of intimacy - most congregants know one another fairly well. This means that starting listening sessions is easier, because there is a level of trust already established. Indeed, this is the starting point for organizing: small groups. Small churches are a small group unto themselves and should begin thinking of themselves as such.

Organizing does not require a lot of resources. In fact, organizing is a means to counter those who have money and use it against others to maintain their privilege. However, time is on the side of those willing to use it to build relationships to make change happen. It doesn't take money - it takes committed relationships to work with others to address injustices collectively. Any congregation can do this.

Large churches can partner with smaller churches to act collectively in concert to address specific issues. Larger churches with financial resources can partner with

marginalized communities, especially marginalized churches, to create an organization for taking collective action and making demands for change. Larger churches with business and political connections can use those connections to negotiate for change, rather than accepting the status quo. While there may be some risk of possibly alienating those who contribute significantly to the church, most church members will appreciate the integrity of honestly advocating for “the least of these.” By inviting those in power to come to the table, their voices can become part of the discernment process. Often, this dialogue leads to an opening of the hearts, minds, and wallets of those who hold power and/or wealth. Hearing the voices of those affected by systemic injustice can be transformative.

Global churches can become organizations that address national or global issues by demanding change from international businesses and national governments and agencies. This is often seen with some denominations, such as the Presbyterian Church (USA), which has an office at both the United Nations and in Washington, DC. Those offices serve to both communicate the social policies of the PCUSA to national and global leaders, as well as serving as points of contact for groups wanting an audience with political leaders on specific issues. To be effective, such offices need to be connected to local churches and congregations to use their stories when speaking truth to power.

What Churches and Denominational Leaders Can Do

The results of this research suggest that not enough denominational leaders are aware of CBCO, and those who are do not actively promote it to engage and grow

churches in social justice ministry. Denominations such as my own, the Presbyterian Church (USA), have actively funded CBCO, but this is not well known within the denomination. (In fact, I did not know of this myself until I undertook this research.) Church leaders can promote CBCO more to ensure more congregations are made aware of how CBCO can help their ministries.

Church leaders can begin to lead their churches in organizing techniques. Partnering with organizations such as Metro IAF and Faith in Action, church leaders can recommend pastors and church members attend courses on community organizing. Finances designated for evangelism and outreach may be reconsidered for use in CBCO training.

Training and financial resources must be found not only to further this research, but to use its findings. What I have found is that CBCO can energize congregations and revitalize the faith of parishioners. My interviews have shown that some clergy have become ministers partly due to their concern for social justice, and CBCO is the natural outgrowth of their faith. If this is true for clergy, it is likely true for many laity as well. Those clergy who were most involved in CBCO were trained by organizers to effectively lead CBCO.

Those churches that partnered with groups such as Metro IAF saw the most effect in their organizing efforts. Denominations and church leaders need to find ways to finance this training, especially for churches within marginalized communities. This itself is a social justice issue - if churches with resources do not use those resources to improve the lives of the marginalized, they will have difficulty saying they truly care about those communities. Denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) should use some of

its mission funds not only as charitable donations, but also to help address the imbalance of inequity in this country. Its Presbyterian Foundation, with over \$2 Billion in investment accounts,¹⁵⁴ can support CBCO training in churches in Harlem, South Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens where there are fewer resources available to address greater needs.

I believe more and more clergy will become interested in CBCO, so seminaries should want to address CBCO in their curriculum and course offerings. Rather than being yet another topic of the Facebook page, “Things They Didn’t Teach Us in Seminary,”¹⁵⁵ seminaries can make CBCO more than an elective or workshop. While CBCO is still not commonly practiced in most churches, seminaries should research and teach this skill to church leaders.

Churches that are actively involved in CBCO must reach out to other congregations to involve them in their work. Clergy who have experience in CBCO can act as mentors to other clergy to help them use CBCO to grow their congregations. Rather than competing with other churches, we must learn to work together and organize together.

When teaching CBCO and using different terminology, church leaders and denominational leadership may be able to avoid some of the stigma that has become attached to terms like “organizing.” Using the methods and strategies of organizing under different terminology, churches may find themselves able to address social issues their parishioners and community members care deeply about.

¹⁵⁴ *2021 Annual Report*, Presbyterian Foundation, Jefferson, IN ([presbyterianfoundation.org](https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org)), <https://www.presbyterianfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/PFD-2021AnnualReport-F.pdf> accessed online December 15, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ttdtuais>. Accessed online December 15, 2023.

Finally, every minister owes their congregation a working knowledge of CBCO, whether that congregation chooses to get involved in it or not. The Apostle Paul tells us to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21 NASB). Too many pastors decide against CBCO without examining it or understanding how it can be used to transform their community. Individual ministers should take time to learn about CBCO, and then learn how to use it within their own contexts. For many clergy, particularly those serving congregations of limited resources or marginalized communities, this will mean the pastor will become the organizer, therefore the pastor will need to be trained extensively.

By prioritizing training in CBCO methods, churches can create healthy mechanisms for their own growth. This is what evangelism is in the context of organizing: sharing the good news which creates new life and transformation. The good news is that change is possible - God has put this task in our hands and empowered us to do it. We can do it if we organize to make it happen.

THE ROMERO PRAYER

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water the seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

This prayer was composed by the late **Bishop Ken Untener** of Saginaw, drafted for a homily by Cardinal John Dearden in November 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included in a reflection book a passage titled "The mystery of the Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are commonly attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him. Pope Francis used the "magnificent" prayer in December 2015 in his Christmas address to the Roman Curia.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ From the Archbishop Romero Trust, <http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/romero-prayer> accessed online January 26, 2023.

EPILOGUE

On December 19, 2023, I led a group of faith leaders to speak to Congresswoman Grace Meng in her Forest Hills office to speak about sponsoring legislation related to earth care: HR 598, called the “Earth Bill,” proposed legislation to phase out fossil fuels and replace them with renewable electricity in power generation, transportation, and agriculture in the U.S. With me were six other people of faith: a Catholic bishop, another mainline Protestant minister, two lay Catholic women, a Jewish man involved with a local community environmental group, and a member of a nonprofit environmental organization. All but two of us were constituents from within the congresswoman’s district. I organized the meeting because I knew most of the people who attended, except the congresswoman herself - I had met her once at an event, but that was the limit of our relationship at the time. I knew the bishop, the minister, and the man who represented the local community organization. These relationships became the key to connecting HR 598 to the local district.

The meeting was warm and cordial, as Ms. Meng had been supportive of other pro-environment bills in the past. Each of us spoke on some aspect of the proposed bill and why we supported it. We included stories of local and international catastrophes caused by climate change and gave her a summary of what was included in the bill. At

the end of our half-hour meeting, she thanked us for meeting with her and said she would become a co-sponsor of the bill.

In organizing terms, this meeting would be considered a “win.” We gained what we asked for. How did it happen? Simply by being engaged, forming relationships, knowing what issues were important to which people, and being involved in the community. As a result, I look forward to continuing to work with this group of people to continue to advocate for legislation for the public good. From this, we see what is possible for churches in terms of organizing for good.

I don’t know if I will see new visitors in our pews because of this, nor do I know if our congregation will get similarly involved. I told the congregation the following Sunday about the meeting and thanked them for their prayers of support. I am sure that somehow the word has spread that our church cares enough about our planet that we speak to our elected officials about it. I’m sure there will be some people in the community who will want to learn more about the Christian faith, seeing that this faith leads people to care and take action.

It’s a start. It’s a step into a long process of making change happen in big and little ways.

It’s what CBCO looks like.

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APPENDIX A
PROJECT PROPOSAL

**CHURCH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AS EVANGELISM:
FINDING BEST PRACTICES FOR CHURCH GROWTH
BY**

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PROPOSAL FOR A DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Submitted to New York Theological Seminary

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Forest Hills, NY USA

2022

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Challenge Statement

The proposed project will research congregation-based community organizing (CBCO) as a model to create church growth. The research will use a qualitative methodology with church members who have been part of CBCO praxis actions. The research will seek to find common “best practices” which will ensure the success of CBCO for churches that use it.

As a methodology of praxis, church-based community organizing (CBCO) can be used to confront and transform various forms of social injustice. The proposed project will interview church volunteers who have participated in CBCO praxis actions and will use qualitative analysis methods on the data and stories drawn from churches using CBCO. The research will seek to find “best practices” which help ensure the success of CBCO for churches that use it.

Chapter 1 - Introduction to the Setting

The proposed project will research the use of church-based community organizing (CBCO) as a method of church outreach. The research will interview members of churches who have done CBCO successfully in their churches, as well as interviews with members whose CBCO efforts were unsuccessful. The research will also include recruiting volunteers, hosting listening sessions, planning events selected by the group, and reflecting on the results of those events. It will incorporate one-on-one interviews and group listening sessions, both with people within the church and with people from the community close to where the church meets.

Six churches from NYC will be chosen to research: three which have seen success (by their own definition) and three which have not seen success (by their own definition) using CBCO. Qualitative research will be used to gather stories of individual church members who have either seen or not seen change using CBCO methods. From these studies, the research will seek common practices which lead toward success, and find what impedes it.

Originally, this project was intent on using CBCO within the researcher's existing congregation, complimenting the study with other congregations. The timeframe for such a study would exceed the time to complete the project, as CBCO can take years to see significant results. Instead, the research will identify what common elements can be

found in successful CBCO efforts, and will put them in trial use within the researcher's congregation. These results will be reported as well.

There is a difference between community organizing and community development. Many churches may be involved in community development, which is different than CBCO. Community development creates new community organizations, but does not necessarily confront existing power structures to effect change. Community development may create change, but more likely this will be through investments.

CBCO can and may lead to community development, but it is a different model and methodology, built on a different understanding of the dynamics of power and privilege.

Community Snapshot: Who is our Neighbor? What is our Role?

The Mission Review Committee of the First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, the researcher's current congregation, conducted a community survey in 2021 with several non-profit organizations and faith communities in Forest Hills and nearby Queens. To summarize some insights from the survey:

- Survey respondents listed wanting diversity in ethnicity and age, a strong sense of fellowship and community, and active mission outreach as the most common answers for what they seek in a faith community.
- Survey respondents cited a number of pressing issues in their own communities, including: the lack of affordable housing and homelessness (number one), followed by food insecurity. Other social issues mentioned included lack of community, safety, crime, and racial hatred (there have been a number of anti-Asian hate crimes in Queens in 2022).

Rather than choosing one particular issue, the research proposes CBCO as a methodology to address multiple social justice-related issues. Community organizing has been associated with faith-based activism since the 1950's, and has brought significant progress to many neighborhoods, as well as enlarged the ministries of many churches engaged in it.

CBCO and Evangelism

Community organizing has not been linked with evangelism very often. They have been considered separate endeavors. However, how can we share good news without trying to improve the lives of those who are marginalized? Is this not part of the good news? When looking at church-based community organizing as part of evangelism, the paradigm shifts.

Evangelism in our society is often seen as a pejorative term. However, the term evangelism, strictly speaking, means sharing good news. The problem is that an insistence on biblical literalism has been promulgated under the rubric of evangelism. However, this is not what evangelism is. Evangelism, if it isn't good news for everyone, is not evangelism. Sharing good news is not about indoctrination, nor strictly about theology. It is about sharing a message of hope and showing the love of God in tangible ways, becoming the body of Christ together to bring healing.

In what is commonly called the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), Jesus commands his followers to “go therefore and make disciples,” but he gives no specific instructions for how they are to do this task. Community organizing gives churches a methodology to do this very thing Jesus commands - by creating relationships, listening, helping, and training leaders.

Some evangelical churches balk at engaging in community organizing, saying they have theological concerns about its goals. However, community organizing creates a way to embody Good News for the poor, and focuses on those Jesus called “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40). By organizing communities of faith to work together to address the needs of the marginalized, those who are struggling gain empowerment as leaders, sharing their stories to bring about change and transformation, which is the heart of evangelism.

At present trajectories, many small congregations will die out in the coming years, and their ministry to their neighborhoods will die with them. Without action, this will be the inevitable result. Until and unless these smaller churches embrace a new way of thinking about their mission and ministry, they may close their doors for good.

Effectiveness of CBCO

The effectiveness of community organizing can be seen by the successes of the civil rights movement in America in the 1950’s and 1960’s. While much work remains confronting racism, the efforts of civil rights leaders led to landmark legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Acts. Without massive movements such as those led by Re. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., these rights may not have been secured. Churches were very much involved in the civil rights movement. Today, churches have renewed their interest in community organizing as a model for growth and community transformation.

At its heart, community organizing is about creating relationships which bring about social change. Its focus is beyond one individual, moving from “me” to “we” as a

means of effecting community transformation. CBCO is not a quick fix for church decline - real relationships take time. Many organizers work for years before seeing significant results. Congregations must be willing to work on building relationships and shared goals before they will see any real change in their community or their own church.

CBCO can also bridge the widening gulf between younger members of our society and older church members by focusing on an “action-based” faith, rather than focusing on doctrines or dogma, which younger generations increasingly see as irrelevant. By emphasizing social change rather than theoretical assertions, the gospel becomes incarnate, here and now. This becomes an invitation to delve deeper into the spiritual motivations for change and transformation on an individual and communal level.

CBCO is a model that has been around since 2001, largely inspired by the work of Saul Alinsky and the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). CBCO has been written about more for practitioners, as “how to do,” rather than researched for its effectiveness in creating change. The proposed research will include research on how CBCO affects communities and how CBCO affects individuals who become involved. Using an ethnographic approach of hearing stories, individual members of congregations will be interviewed to tell their stories of community organizing.

Church-based community organizing can be seen as a coordinated means of both addressing social problems and energizing congregations. This is due to the methodology of CBCO itself: listening. This is why this research will entail listening to stories of the people who have done CBCO themselves.

What Is CBCO?

Community organizing begins with a conversation. An organizer starts by asking about each person as an individual: what are their concerns? What problems do they face? Are they willing to work with others to create change? These interviews lead to larger conversations with teams of people who decide what next step is needed, and create an action plan together.

As Robert English of MetroIAF puts it, organizing is not a format for activism for “liberal” Christians, for that sort of praxis fades out all too quickly. Community organizing is not about being in the streets (although there may be times when being in the streets is necessary). It is about building a block of relationships to create an organization which then can make change happen by the power of being a large organization. It’s about offsetting the power of money and political power by leveraging power through a large organization. That organization must be built one relationship at a time.

Whether organizing for community needs, to address global warming, or to confront racism, the church becomes relevant by doing something about the current problems facing the marginalized. Without such actions, the message of Good News sounds like mere words.

Chapter 2 - Analysis of the Challenge

CBCO and Politics

Eric Adams, Mayor of New York, recently spoke to a group of clergy about the problem of affordable housing in New York City. Mayor Adams said he knew what it was like to not have a stable home growing up. His commitment to creating affordable housing was rooted in his own childhood. His constituency is not primarily with the wealthy elite - it is with people who face real problems finding housing they can afford, like his mother had.

At times, community organizing will include working to put people like Mayor Adams in power to address specific concerns of a community. Community organizing gets people to the polls to vote for systemic change. Community organizing is not theoretical - it is often overtly political, action-oriented, and frequently confrontational.

To those who would protest that this type of political action seems un-Christian, one must recall that in the gospels Jesus was executed by the Roman government for daring to declare himself king of the Jews, in opposition to Rome itself. While the gospels spiritualize Jesus' kingdom, the death by crucifixion was frequently meted out by Rome to those thought to be subversive to the state. Jesus' death was indeed quite political.

To those who would say that community organizing is not part of the gospel, a counterargument could be made that helping the poor is part of the Good News itself. If

the poor remain poor after they become members of the Kingdom of God, what kind of kingdom has God created? An ineffective one, seemingly, hardly worth calling God's own kingdom. Kingdoms have power - power to help its own citizens, especially including the poor.

Yet we hold this in tension with Jesus' statement to Pilate that "My kingdom is not of this world." (John 18:36) There is an element of transcendence which no human effort or institution will create or realize, and this includes any results of community organizing. We see moments of the coming kingdom, but it is not fully realized, it is only partial, impermanent, a fleeting glimpse of what is possible or what is to come. As the Apostle Paul puts it, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face." (1 Corinthians 13:12) From this dialectic we see the struggle as a never-ending battle for the improvement of the lot of the marginalized, which is consistent with scripture - while the Hebrew Scriptures are replete with references to human warfare, the New Testament makes reference to the battle being spiritual, and ongoing. As Ephesians 6:12 puts it, "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Revised Standard Version) In this passage, the political forces of this world and human political power are portrayed as being aligned against God and those God stands with, marginalizing the larger portion of humanity. From this perspective, we see community organizing as both political and spiritual work, contending with political and spiritual power.

CBCO in the Context of Church Ministry

Community organizing is not the sole ministry of the church, nor can evangelism be reduced to community organizing. The Good News is much more comprehensive than simply empowering people to make change. That being said, the Good News itself brings change, and so community organizing can be seen as consistent with the goals of community organizing by elevating the status of marginalized people to their God-given status of bearers of the image Dei, created in God's image, as the creation story asserts (Genesis 1:26). CBCO is a process or method of engaging the ekklesia, the people of God gathered as church, in the broader rubric of transforming the world into the kingdom God intends it to be, by simply meeting people and acting together to make change happen.

The proposed project intends to lead to a greater understanding of how churches can engage their local communities in creating change for the marginalized. While CBCO is the focus of the research, the real goal is promoting social transformation - CBCO is simply a tool for making change happen.

Chapter 3 - Research Questions: Biblical/Theological, Historical and Project Specific

1. Is there a biblical basis for church-based community organizing?

There is a need for a theological language which conjoins the praxis of community organizing and the language of Biblical faith. The Christian faith in scripture includes a living resistance to the values of a system which exploits people for profit, based on a theological understanding that God is opposed to such a system.

Any attempt to find a language which brings Christian ideology into conversation with political ideology must deal with Christology in order to be deemed “Christian.” Given the many critics of social activism itself by so many Christians, it is all the more necessary to find an adequate Christology which situates the Crucified and Risen One within the dialectic of social justice.

Jurgen Moltmann suggests a way forward in his book, “The Way of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵⁷ As Resane puts it, “(Moltmann) therefore seeks to replace an orthodox two-nature understanding of Christology as put forth by the councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea, with a Christology of process and sociality that fits into his larger theology of eschatological hope.”¹⁵⁸ While this may not be “evangelical” language, there is an

¹⁵⁷ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995.

¹⁵⁸ Kelebogile T. Resane, “Moltmann in conversation with feminist theologians: How does his theology correlate and differ with feminist theology?” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Pretoria, Vol. 42, Iss. 1, 2012, p. 7,

energy to this language which illustrates how a theology of liberation can provide a solid basis for Christian praxis.

Liberation theology since its inception has advocated for God's identification with the poor.¹⁵⁹ Citing scriptures from both the Hebrew Bible and the gospels, we see God is concerned with how the marginalized are treated: Isaiah 61 proclaims "good news for the oppressed,"¹⁶⁰ while God tells Moses in the desert, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt...indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them..."¹⁶¹ In Luke's gospel, Mary's song includes proclaiming, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."¹⁶² In Matthew's gospel, Jesus declares, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."¹⁶³ From such scriptures we see that God is not only concerned about the marginalized, but identifies with them.

We see from other scriptures that organizing is part of the history of the church itself. In Nehemiah we read of the story when the people organized to register their complaint against the nobles and officials, saying "Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred, our children are the same as their children, and yet we are forcing our sons

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2573713331/fulltextPDF/9275A0B3229F45FFPQ/2?accountid=10226>
accessed online November 21, 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, 1972.

¹⁶⁰ Isaiah 61:1 (unless otherwise denoted, all scripture references are New International Version)

¹⁶¹ Exodus 3:7-8

¹⁶² Luke 1:52-53

¹⁶³ Matthew 25:40

and daughters to be slaves...we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”¹⁶⁴ From this corporate action, Nehemiah confronted the rulers of Jerusalem and demanded change, with the result that the rulers agreed to restore what had been taken from the people.

In the early Church, we read of how deacons were appointed to deal with community concerns. Greek believers collectively demand a fair apportionment of food for their widows, and the apostles asked them to appoint their own overseers to ensure a fair distribution.¹⁶⁵ As the Apostle Paul wrote to the early church in Corinth, spiritual gifts are given to the Church “for the common good,”¹⁶⁶ to be shared by all within the church.

In recent history, there have been Christian movements which have taken these scriptures as a basis for action, including the Gamaliel organization in Chicago and Metro IAF of New York. The proposed project will research the history of these organizations and current partnerships, as well as the theological basis for their methods.

The proposed project will more fully explore a theological basis for community organizing as not simply outreach, but as evangelism in its own right. As Jesus is quoted in Luke, the Spirit’s anointing is to bring good news to the poor, which entails release for captives and freedom for the oppressed.¹⁶⁷ Jesus’ then declared this as his own personal

¹⁶⁴ Nehemiah 5:5

¹⁶⁵ Acts 6:1-6

¹⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:7

¹⁶⁷ Luke 4:16-21

mission - he himself was the accomplishment or fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, meaning that in him, the poor were released and freed from oppression.

This research will explore tension within scripture itself of what salvation means, and the role of the church in bringing God's salvation. The pastoral epistles argue for maintaining the status quo for slaves and women, while Paul argues in Galatians for a more thorough-going freedom in Christ, where "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."¹⁶⁸ That being said, community organizing is oriented toward a praxis of liberation and freedom for all. This research will explore how that is deeply rooted in the Good News of scripture.

2. What role has the Church played in community organizing historically?

One could argue that this nation arose from community organizing, but specifically, the abolitionist movement was a result of church organizing as a response to the injustice of chattel slavery in America. Since the founding of this country and the subsequent abolitionist movement, there has been some element of community organizing in churches in America up to the present day.

This project will investigate recent church organizing history, drawing particularly from the civil rights movement. The research will include instances where community organizing arose as a result of churches' responses to specific social injustices of their day and time, how their organizing was carried out, and the results of those church actions taken.

¹⁶⁸ Galatians 3:28

3. Within New York City, where and how has community organizing been used effectively with churches?

Case studies will include churches in the NYC area where community organizing has brought change and improvement to specific neighborhoods. By interviewing church members who have been part of community organizing, this research will find what has worked, which will help other churches in their efforts to organize themselves.

In Queens, MetroIAF has formed Queenspower,¹⁶⁹ a group of churches which have used community organizing as a methodology. Churches include the First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica, St. Matthew's Community AME Church of Hollis, and St. Mark AME Church of Jackson Heights. The research will engage members of these and other churches affiliated with MetroIAF to query how they got involved with community organizing and its effects on their lives and the lives of their churches.

¹⁶⁹ <https://www.queenspower.org/> (accessed December 5, 2022)

Chapter 4 - Plan of Implementation

The plan of implementation includes two parts: 1) interviewing at least three workers from three churches which have successfully used church-based community organizing, and 2) an action research process of involving the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills in church-based community organizing. The results of both will be compiled in the final written report.

Part 1 will involve two sets of congregations: a) three churches who have successfully used CBCO for a period of at least six years, and have seen positive results, and b) three churches who have unsuccessfully attempted to use CBCO for any period of time, and either are continuing unsuccessfully or have abandoned their CBCO practices. The research will interview at least three and no more than six volunteer CBCO workers from each of these three same churches. The total number of interviews will be between nine and 18 interviews. The term “workers” will designate volunteers who have participated in church-based community organizing by conducting one on one interviews themselves, and have participated in small group planning and holding organized events. Other than this criteria, there is no other qualifying requirement to be interviewed for this project. This criteria will be used for both sets of churches - those successful with CBCO and those less successful.

In the end there will be two sets of complete interviews with data to compare between the two groups. The research will then use qualitative research methodologies to compare and contrast these two sets of interviews.

Every interview will be audio recorded. Transcripts will be created from the recorded audio interviews. Names will be redacted from the interviews in the transcripts to maintain confidentiality. Comparison of the two sets of transcripts will seek common terms, themes, or practices that are common to each of these groups. For example, if the term “listening” comes up frequently, that term will be highlighted and studied for its context, use, and frequency throughout the interviews.

Qualitative statistical studies on the interviews will seek “best practices” which can be found in the group of churches which have successfully used church-based community organizing. In similar fashion the research will seek to uncover any inadequacies within the group of less successful churches. For example, if the less successful group used the term “listening” less frequently than the successful group, this would be statistically investigated and compared.

Churches to be interviewed will be selected with recommendations from MetroIAF, an organization known for CBCO. Specifically, the research will seek to interview workers from Queenspower, an association of nearby churches currently involved in CBCO. These churches include First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica (PCUSA), New Jerusalem Worship Center in Jamaica, Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Queens Village, St. Mark AME Church in Flushing, St. Matthew Community AME Church of Hollis, and St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Rosedale. With

introductions and input from MetroIAF, three of these congregations will be selected for this project.

Most churches discover that CBCO can be a daunting enterprise. Pastors are not trained to become community organizers, and most congregations do not have community organizers as members (although many community organizers are people of faith, and worship regularly). For this reason, many churches elect to get assistance from a community organizing organization such as MetroIAF. Such organizations provide technical assistance and help with recruiting and training for CBCO. In return, churches pay dues to such organizations.

The interviews will include hearing stories of success: how these churches have brought about change in their communities using CBCO. CBCO has been used to empower neighborhoods to change their local schools, bring in affordable housing, and reduce crime. The research will collect specific stories of what changes have been made since CBCO was implemented.

Statistical data will also be collected to outline quantitative differences between the churches. This data will include how long church-based community organizing has been practiced within each church, the size of each congregation, the number of volunteers engaged in church-based community organizing, and any differences over time of the size of the congregation. For example, it would be noteworthy if a church which began church-based community organizing saw its membership numbers increase over a five-year span. While this correlation may not be seen having a causal effect, it may be evidence that church-based community organizing may have a beneficial effect on membership growth. Likewise, if a church attempts church-based community

organizing over a period of five years and sees no growth in membership, this may also indicate that church-based community organizing may not have an effect on membership.

By comparing qualitative research with statistical demographic research, the project will allow for a more multidimensional evaluation of CBCO in the churches and their communities. Stories of successful CBCO campaigns, community change, and demographic data will create more data points from which conclusions might be drawn. Case studies can become sources of inspiration for other churches seeking to replicate successful outcomes.

The interviewees from each church will be selected by recommendation of the acting senior pastor. The senior pastor of each of these six churches will also be interviewed to determine her or his level of commitment and support for church-based community organizing, as well as her or his thoughts on what worked and did not work in the endeavor. Therefore, the worker selected will not be random. They will represent the best examples of organizers within each congregation.

A list of questions will be developed by the researcher, with input from the site team. This survey will be submitted to an IRB prior to conducting interviews. All interviewees, including senior pastors, will be told about the research, the purpose of the survey, and an assurance of their confidentiality. Pseudonyms will be used in the actual paper if or when the research is published. A sample interview questionnaire is included in Appendix A.

The end result of this ethnographic research will be to compile a list of quote best practices" for churches who wish to be successful in church-based community organizer.

Such a list will include practices which tend towards successful results, as well as practices to avoid.

Along with this research on other churches, the congregation of First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills NY (FPCFH) will also be involved as a research site. Since community organizing usually takes longer than the scope of the D.Min. project allows, the FPCFH project will not be the primary research, but will supplement the ethnographic research of the other churches.

FPCFH will use CBCO as a case study of action research, allowing the pastor to participate as both researcher and subject. Volunteers will be recruited to attempt to use CBCO methods in the local community. The CBCO group of FPCFH will be self-directed, choosing its own social issues to address and means to address them. The pastor will participate as a CBCO leader and trainer.

Using a trained community organizer as a coach, FPCFH will take initial steps towards developing their own program. This research is not intended to implement CBCO at FPCFH, as that will be their own decision during the process. The research will simply record the process and observe how it unfolds, paying particular attention to victories and pitfalls which occur as they happen. Of course, during this process, the pastor is not a dispassionate observer; however, as CBCO itself is based on community decision-making, the decision to continue CBCO or lay it aside will not be for the pastor to make.

As with the other churches, workers will be interviewed to determine their satisfaction with CBCO as a method of church outreach, and their own sense of fulfillment as workers with the methodology. As with the other churches, names will be

kept confidential, and any interviews will later use pseudonyms to protect the identity of volunteers. The results of FPCFH's CBCO efforts will be compared with the other church groups.

As Mary Clark Moschella points out, ethnographic research can lead to congregational change and transformation.¹⁷⁰ FPCFH is a widely diverse Presbyterian congregation (PCUSA), with members from every continent on Earth (except Australia and Antarctica). There is diversity in membership, leadership, sexuality (FPCFH is an LGBTQ-affirming congregation) and age - the median age is in the late 40's.

FPCFH in the Research Project

FPCFH is quite small, with an older building. It was the first house of worship built in Forest Hills in 1922. In its heyday, between 100 and 125 people attended worship services weekly; today, it is around 35 per Sunday (online and in person - FPCFH continues to use hybrid services for worship). Its declining membership is consistent with its larger denomination, which continues to shrink in membership.

CBCO includes one-on-one interviews, which is also a methodology of ethnographic research. Recording the narrative of a small group of church members from FPCFH in their initial steps with CBCO will add a real-world, real-time perspective to the research, and will add depth to the data available for analysis.

Not all churches will want to use church-based community organizing as a methodology for community transformation. This research is not an attempt to convince them that church-based community organizing is the best method to use. This research is

¹⁷⁰ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, OH, 2008, p. 41.

for those churches who wish to use or attempt to use church-based community organizing to make positive changes within their communities. Outside of this specific set of parameters, this research makes no claim.

Chapter 5 - Ministerial Competencies

The proposed research project will increase the ministerial competencies of the candidate as Theologian, Prophetic Agent and Leader.

Theologian

Church-based community organizing (CBCO) differs from standard community organizing by being church-based. Being connected with a specific faith community grounds the understanding and practice by being informed through sacred stories and specifically Christian values. When congregations are engaged in CBCO, their actions reflect their faith,

By asking church members to tell their own stories and listen to the stories and interests of others, a church leader can invite theological reflection into the storytelling, connecting the members' own stories to those found in scripture. This in turn connects them to God by seeing their own stories as sacred.

This is particularly the case when engaged in what is called “praxis,” the acting out in faith as community, together, demanding social change. Events such as rallies, boycotts, visits to political or business leaders, or voting become faith events, opportunities to show faith in action.

A large part of CBCO is determining as a group what particular social problem requires action. This is decided as a group, and is based on a shared set of values and

ethics. The basis for these shared values is theological, rooted in the shared understanding of who God is and what God is calling the church to do, together.

Liberation theology is based on a feedback loop of action-reflection-action, where the group looks back on the act or event completed and its outcome, then discusses whether that action had the intended effects or not. Reflection includes theological reflection as well as gauging the event's effectiveness. This cycle focuses the group's plans on the specific conditions they wish to change, and why they want change to occur. It is a theological enterprise.

Prophetic agent

The goal of CBCO is transformation - that is its entire purpose. CBCO is about making change happen, righting wrongs of social injustice by group action and confrontation. As praxis, CBCO becomes prophetic action collectively.

CBCO does not have an agenda outside liberation of the marginalized. The steps taken by the church are oriented towards speaking truth to power and calling for change. This process may be led by individuals, but it is sustained by a multitude of leaders who have been trained to lead others, who have taken direct action to change their own situations. CBCO gives voice and power to those who are voiceless and powerless to confront those in power who can give freedom to those who demand it in the name of justice.

Because CBCO is "bottom-up," rather than hierarchical, it puts those at the bottom in leadership to bring change. The change they seek is to help themselves; their partners in praxis are sisters and brothers in transforming the world.

CBCO is less interested in theoretical knowledge than in creating actual and lasting social change by using group power dynamics. It is continually focused on lifting up those who are facing an injustice until there is none to be found. It begins with one's self, understanding one's own social location, power and privilege, as well as one's own interests and one's disadvantages. Its goal is equality, where "every valley is lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low" (Isaiah 40:4), where those who mourn are comforted (Matthew 5:4).

While social justice leaders may become well known, CBCO is not focused on speaking through one voice - it elevates the voices of many to speak as one. Rather than the voice of a single leader, the prophetic voice of CBCO is focused on the corporate voice of the church, assembled together to speak out against injustice.

Leader

Leadership is about more than simply leading - leadership builds more leaders. In the examples of scripture, those who followed the leadership of others became leaders themselves. Joshua, the faithful servant of Moses, led the Israelites into Canaan when Moses was gone, and the disciples of Jesus became apostles, leaders of the early Church after Jesus left. Without building leaders to pick up what has been started, the process of transformation ends when leaders exit.

A large part of CBCO is building leaders who will grow the organization and get more people to follow and be engaged themselves. Movements grow not so much from one prophetic voice as much as from many.

Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, taught Moses about leadership when he instructed Moses to appoint judges over the people, in groups from 1,000 to 100 to 50 to 10.¹⁷¹ Small group leadership is the most effective means of instilling discipline and creating change.

Military commanders understand this. Every commander has a second in command, who will take command should something happen to the commander. This "chain of command" reaches down to the lowest level - every member understands they are to take command if needed, in order to accomplish the mission.

Leadership involves listening, not merely taking charge. Leadership requires discernment, knowing what can work. Leadership is built on creating success and learning from it. Leaders learn their lessons and carry them forward. CBCO creates leaders by working together, elevating those who normally would be marginalized to use their own voice to inspire others to follow and act with them. Without this, CBCO ultimately fails.

The feedback loop of action-reflection-action allows leaders at all levels to learn lessons to take forward with them for the next action. The goal is to create small successes, which raises the confidence of the group and engages others to join in larger endeavors and larger successes. Leadership is taught in the very process of CBCO. It is not limited to clergy - the only requirement to be a leader is to care deeply, listen well, and be willing to act.

¹⁷¹ Exodus 18:14-26

Chapter 6 - Evaluation Process

This project will rely on the oversight of a site team, which currently consists of the following members:

Rev. Dr. Robert Folz-Morrison: Bob has recently retired Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of New York City (PCUSA).

Rev. Dr. Derrick McQueen: Derrick is Pastor of St. James Presbyterian Church of Harlem, Adjunct Professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary, and Associate Director of the Center for African American Religion, Sexual Politics and Social Justice at Columbia University.

Mr. Alex Weisendanger: Alex is Campaign Coordinator for SEIU 32BJ and for the Coalition for Affordable Hospitals. His book, “Seeds of Justice: Organizing Your Church to Transform the World” is available on Amazon.com.

This project entails interviewing between nine and 18 individual workers, along with six senior pastors, over the period of 6 to 8 months in calendar year of 2023. The evaluation will include verification of the following:

1. Did all churches get adequate representation and input from at least three interviewees?
Did all senior pastors participate in being interviewed?

2. Was there equal representation by both groups? I.e., did the less successful group participate as much as the successful group?

Upon completion of the research and an analysis of the data procured, the conclusions will be reviewed for bias, and its findings will be followed up with each church involved in the research itself. Each church will be asked for feedback on the research and findings.

In this research, the researcher is both insider and outsider: an insider at FPCFH as its pastor, and an outsider with the other churches being interviewed.¹⁷² To distinguish between these roles, it will be important to separate the findings of FPCFH and the six other churches, so the data will be kept separate.

As Taylor and Bogdan point out, it is critical to be explicit in identifying social location of both researcher and those being interviewed, and it is important to be

¹⁷² Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 2011, p. 78.

accurate.¹⁷³ To this end, there will be a review of the recordings and transcripts to ensure accuracy, and those who have been interviewed will be given opportunity to examine their own stories for editorial comments. Transcripts will be included as appendices for review.

Taylor and Bogdan have editorial suggestions for ethnographic research, such as the use of quotations, which will also be considered when editing the research findings.¹⁷⁴ This research is written from a perspective of liberation theology, so it will be important to gain feedback to see whether this perspective has created any biases in the research findings which might invalidate any of its conclusions. Before submitting the research for final approval, the findings will be reviewed by the site team and academic advisors for clarity, completeness and accuracy.

Tim Sensing points out how evaluation becomes part of the process of the evolution of the church.¹⁷⁵ The findings, after evaluation, will be queried in terms of theological expectations: did community organizing work to create church growth? How or how not? Why or why not? These questions are necessary, not just in terms of evaluating this particular project, but more importantly for any potential contribution to the larger church itself.

¹⁷³ Steven J. Taylor and Robert Bogdan, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods (Third Edition): A Guidebook and Resource*, "What You Should Tell Your Readers." John Wiley and Sons, New York, NY, 1998, p. 168.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁷⁵ Sensing, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

As Moschella points out, evaluation is self-reflexive as well.¹⁷⁶ As researcher, the writer is engaged in the project of transformation, and is also changed in the engagement. Part of the evaluation process is self-evaluation: what impact did this project have on the writer? On assumptions previously held? On the theological paradigms used - were they supported or not? How did this affirm or change the writer's theological point of view? This should be included as part of the conclusions of the research itself.

The evaluation process will conclude with an in-depth discussion of the written research project by a team of advisors, which will include the site team, the academic advisors and dean, and the senior pastors of the participating churches for their comments. Each will be given a copy of the final document.

Proposed Timeline

<u>Milestone</u>	<u>Anticipated Completion</u>
1. Select Site Team	November 2022
2. Submit Project Proposal	January 2023
3. Submit IRB	April 2023
4. IRB Approval	May 2023
5. Church Senior Pastor Interviews	June 2023
6. Church Volunteer Interviews	July - August 2023
7. Data Analysis	September - November 2023
8. Finish Dissertation (draft)	December 2023
9. Submit Dissertation	February 2024
10. Publish Results	May 2024

¹⁷⁶ Moschella, Op. cit., p. 222.

Proposed Budget

<u>Item</u>	<u>Cost</u>
1. Application Software	\$2000
2. Travel	\$500
3. Printing/Publishing	unknown at this time
4. Coaching	\$500
5. Transcription Software	\$175
6. Zoom fees	\$150

Proposal References

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PROPOSAL Appendix A –

Community Organizer Volunteer Interview (form):

Please provide us the following information - it will be kept confidential, and not tied to your specific name. This data will be used for analyzing responses only in terms of categories of respondents.

Demographic Data:

Age

Gender

Ethnic Identity

Residence (area in NYC)

Years Organizing

Church Affiliation(s)

Level of education

1. Please describe your experience with CBCO. (Probe for how many years, events participated in, training received, issues addressed)

2. Please tell us about something that left a positive mark in you when you were organizing.

3. Please tell us about what worked as far as being effective with community organizing - what skills did you learn to use? How did you acquire those skills?
What was the outcome?
4. Were there any situations that were less than positive in your community organizing experience? What were they? What made them less than positive?
5. What do you do well? What do you wish you could improve? Why?
6. Are there any tips you would like to pass on to other church volunteers as far as CBCO? What should they expect?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

PROPOSAL Appendix B:

Church-Based Community Organizing Model

Source: faithinaction.org



**Don't do for others what they can do for themselves*

PROPOSAL Appendix C

IRB Research Protocol

New York Theological Seminary

Institutional Review Board Application— Research Protocol

1. List your name, contact information, and the name of the institution, course, or project to which your research is related. List the names and contact information for your faculty advisors to this project.

Principal Researcher:

Rev. Jeffrey Courter

New York Theological Seminary

112-06 70th St., Forest Hills, NY 11375

jcourter@mail.nyts.edu

(773) 712-5280

Faculty Advisor:

Rev. Dr. Willie Francois III

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program in Social Justice

New York Theological Seminary, New York, NY

wfrancois@nyts.edu

(409) 939-1818

2. Explain the nature and purpose of this research. What do you hope to learn and why?

This project will study church-based community organizing (CBCO) to find best practices through an ethnographic study of volunteers. Churches looking to expand their mission and ministry through CBCO will hopefully be given practices to use, as well as avoid, to make their CBCO outreach as effective as possible.

3. Describe your research methods and procedures.

Six churches in New York City which have used CBCO will be studied, three successful in their CBCO ministry, three less than successful. Volunteers from each church will be interviewed to hear stories of success and failure. Their stories will be analyzed for common themes to put into place to replicate success.

4. Attach a copy of all survey instruments or a list of the questions that you intend to ask potential participants. If these questions are not completely settled, submit your tentative plans.

See Appendix A of this project proposal.

5. Describe your relationship to the potential participants. Are you their pastor, chaplain, teacher, friend or other?

The Researcher has no formal relationship with any of the participants, outside clergy colleagues sharing a common interest in the gospel.

6. Discuss any potential benefits you envision for the participants in your study. What is the good that you hope will result from this study? What benefits, if any, will accrue to the participants?

By participating in this study, the Researcher hopes to provide churches interested in CBCO with practical practices and tools for engaging in new ways to minister to their communities in social justice work.

7. Discuss any potential risks to the participants in your study. Are any of your participants members of vulnerable groups (such as children, persons with stigmatizing illnesses, whistleblowers, prisoners, persons with physically or mentally disabling conditions, etc.)? Explain the measures you will take to provide for their privacy. Explain how you will respond if a participant has adverse effects as a result of your study.

Volunteers will be selected by pastors of churches whose identities will be kept confidential. Names where used in the research findings and stories will be pseudonyms.

Volunteers interviewed will be briefed on the nature of the study, and allowed to opt out of answering questions they consider to be triggering.

8. Explain the policies and procedures that you will use to insure the confidentiality and or anonymity of your participants. Will you use pseudonyms or a numerical coding system? Are there any factors other than names that might identify your research subjects? If so, what will you do to ensure anonymity? How will your data be stored? How long will the data be kept?

Pseudonyms will be used for this study. While demographic information will be gathered from respondents, they will be aggregate and quantitatively analyzed collectively, such that individuals will not be identifiable. Data will be stored on a password protected Google drive. Upon completion of the dissertation, the data will be kept for five years and then destroyed.

9. Include a copy of any consent forms that you are planning to use. The language used on these forms should be clear, simple, and straightforward, not laden with technical jargon.

See Appendix D below.

10. What will happen to the final report of your research? Do you plan to share the summary with the class, community or congregation? What form will this

representation take, and what media will you use? List any possible venues in which you might publish this work now or in the future.

The final report will be submitted to New York Theological Seminary as part of its Doctor of Ministry program in social justice. If this work is deemed to be of sufficient value to merit being published, it may be published at a later date. The report will be available to be shared with other churches and congregations interested in church-based community organizing, in the hopes their ministries will be aided by its findings.

PROPOSAL Appendix D

IRB Interview Protocol

New York Theological Seminary Informed Consent Form

My name is Rev. Jeff Courter. I am a student at New York Theological Seminary conducting research for a Doctor of Ministry program in social justice ministries. My cell phone number is (773) 712-5280, and my email address is rev.jeffrey.courter@gmail.com.

My academic director is Rev. Dr. Willie Francois III. He can be reached at wfrancois@nyts.edu, (409) 939-1818.

(You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.)

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to study church-based community organizing. You have been identified as someone who has actively participated in church-based community organizing yourself, which is why you have been asked to share your story. We hope to discover the “best practices” for church-based community organizing through hearing stories from people like you who have been involved in it.

Procedure

If you consent to participate in this study, you will be asked to be interviewed. There will be no commitments beyond the interview itself. Notes may be taken during the interview,

and audio and/or video recordings will be utilized. Your name will not be used. You will be given a written transcript of the interview as soon as it is available.

Time Required

The interview will likely take about 45 minutes. It may be shorter or perhaps longer, depending on what you share.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research project is voluntary. If you choose to be interviewed, you may decline to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. You are also free to end the interview at any time.

Risks

In any interviews involving self-disclosure, there is always some possibility that you may feel uncomfortable or distressed from remembering events discussed during the interview. If this happens, please bring your concerns up to the interviewer, or you can ask the interview be ended immediately.

Benefits

We hope that your participation will give other churches practical ways to be effective with community organizing in their church. You may also enjoy sharing stories of success as a positive experience of remembering helping others.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

All names will be kept confidential in the reporting and stories used in this study. The final paper will use pseudonyms – made-up names – for all participants.

Importance of Candor

Please be open, candid, forthright, and honest in all your answers to all questions, to ensure we are accurate with our recommendations to other churches.

Sharing the Results

Results of this research may be shared through class presentation, in written form, or in other ways. There is the possibility that I may publish this study or refer to it in published writing in the future. In this event, I will continue to use pseudonyms (as described above) and I may alter some identifying details in order to further protect your anonymity.

Before You Sign

By signing below, you are agreeing to participate in this project with the possibility of your words being included in writing in a final paper. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be given to you. Separate copies will also be kept sealed at New York Theological Seminary and by the researcher. Transcripts of all interviews will be kept separate from this form, for confidentiality.

Print Participant's Name: _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

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APPENDIX B

Community Organizer Volunteer Interview (form):

Please provide us with the following information - it will be kept confidential, and not tied to your specific name. This data will be used for analyzing responses only in terms of categories of respondents.

Demographic Data:

Age

Gender

Ethnic Identity

Residence (area in NYC)

Years Organizing

Church Affiliation(s)

Level of education

1. Please describe your experience with CBCO. (Probe for how many years, events participated in, training received, issues addressed)
2. Please tell us about something that left a positive mark in you when you were organizing.

3. Please tell us about what worked as far as being effective with community organizing - what skills did you learn to use? How did you acquire those skills? What was the outcome?

4. Were there any situations that were less than positive in your community organizing experience? What were they? What made them less than positive?

5. What do you do well? What do you wish you could improve? Why?

6. Are there any tips you would like to pass on to other church volunteers as far as CBCO? What should they expect?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

APPENDIX C
Church-Based Community Organizing Model

Source: faithinaction.org



**Don't do for others what they can do for themselves*

APPENDIX D

IRB Research Protocol

New York Theological Seminary

Institutional Review Board Application— Research Protocol

1. List your name, contact information, and the name of the institution, course, or project to which your research is related. List the names and contact information for your faculty advisors to this project.

A: Principal Researcher:

Rev. Jeffrey Courter

112-06 70th St., Forest Hills, NY 11375

jcourter@mail.nyts.edu , (773) 712-5280

Faculty Advisor:

Rev. Dr. Willie Francois III

Director, Doctor of Ministry Program in Social Justice

New York Theological Seminary, New York, NY

wfrancois@nyts.edu, (409) 939-1818

2. Explain the nature and purpose of this research. What do you hope to learn and why?

A: This project studied church-based community organizing (CBCO) to find best practices through an ethnographic study of church leaders who had participated in CBCO. Churches looking to expand their mission and ministry through CBCO will hopefully be given practices to use, as well as avoid, to make their CBCO outreach as effective as possible.

3. Describe your research methods and procedures.

A: Eight churches in New York City which have used CBCO were studied. Church leaders from each church were interviewed to hear their stories of success and failure. Their stories were analyzed for common themes to put into place to replicate success.

4. Attach a copy of all survey instruments or a list of the questions that you intend to ask potential participants. If these questions are not completely settled, submit your tentative plans.

A: See Appendix B of this project proposal.

5. Describe your relationship to the potential participants. Are you their pastor, chaplain, teacher, friend or other?

A: The researcher had no formal relationship with any of the participants, outside clergy colleagues sharing a common interest in the gospel and community organizing.

6. Discuss any potential benefits you envision for the participants in your study. What is the good that you hope will result from this study? What benefits, if any, will accrue to the participants?

A: By participating in this study, the researcher hopes to provide churches interested in CBCO with practical practices and tools for engaging in new ways to minister to their communities in social justice work.

7. Discuss any potential risks to the participants in your study. Are any of your participants members of vulnerable groups (such as children, persons with stigmatizing illnesses, whistleblowers, prisoners, persons with physically or mentally disabling conditions, etc.)? Explain the measures you will take to provide for their privacy. Explain how you will respond if a participant has adverse effects as a result of your study.

A: Volunteers were pastors of churches whose names were used in the research findings and stories within this paper. Volunteers interviewed were briefed on the nature of the study and allowed to opt out of answering questions they consider to be triggering. Volunteers were offered anonymity if they desired not to be named or quoted in the paper.

8. Explain the policies and procedures that you will use to ensure the confidentiality and or anonymity of your participants. Will you use pseudonyms or a numerical coding system? Are there any factors other than names that might identify your research subjects? If so, what will you do to ensure anonymity? How will your data be stored? How long will the data be kept?

A: All interviewees in this study expressly agreed to be quoted in this paper, and were given a copy of interview notes for their approval before use. Pseudonyms were not required.

9. Include a copy of any consent forms that you are planning to use. The language used on these forms should be clear, simple, and straightforward, not laden with technical jargon.

A: See Appendix E below.

10. What will happen to the final report of your research? Do you plan to share the summary with the class, community, or congregation? What form will this representation take, and what media will you use? List any possible venues in which you might publish this work now or in the future.

A: The final report will be submitted to New York Theological Seminary as part of its Doctor of Ministry program in social justice. If this work is deemed to be of sufficient

value to merit being published, it may be published at a later date. The report will be available to be shared with other churches and congregations interested in church-based community organizing, in the hopes their ministries will be aided by its findings.

APPENDIX E

IRB Interview Protocol

New York Theological Seminary Informed Consent Form

(To the interviewee):

My name is Rev. Jeff Courter. I am a student at New York Theological Seminary conducting research for a Doctor of Ministry program in social justice ministries.

My cell phone number is (773) 712-5280, and my email address is rev.jeffrey.courter@gmail.com.

My academic director is Rev. Dr. Willie Francois III.

He can be reached at wfrancois@nyts.edu, or call (409) 939-1818.

(You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.)

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to study church-based community organizing. You have been identified as someone who has actively participated in church-based community organizing yourself, which is why you have been asked to share your story. We hope to discover the “best practices” for church-based community organizing through hearing stories from people like you who have been involved in it.

Procedure

If you consent to participate in this study, you will be interviewed. There will be no commitments beyond the interview itself. Notes may be taken during the interview, and

audio and/or video recordings will be utilized. Your name will not be used unless you expressly agree to it. You can be given a written transcript of the interview as soon as it is available if you want.

Time Required

The interview will likely take about 45 minutes. It may be shorter or perhaps longer, depending on what you share.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research project is voluntary. If you choose to be interviewed, you may decline to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. You are also free to end the interview at any time.

Risks

In any interviews involving self-disclosure, there is always some possibility that you may feel uncomfortable or distressed from remembering events discussed during the interview. If this happens, please bring your concerns up to the interviewer, or you can ask the interview to be ended immediately.

Benefits

I hope that your participation will give other churches practical ways to be effective with community organizing in their church. You may also enjoy sharing stories of success as a positive experience of remembering helping others.

Confidentiality/Anonymity

Unless given express authorization otherwise, all names will be kept confidential in the reporting and stories used in this study. The final paper will use pseudonyms if needed – made-up names – for any participants who wish to remain anonymous.

Sharing the Results

Results of this research may be shared through class presentation, in written form, or in other ways. There is the possibility that I may publish this study or refer to it in published writing in the future. In this event, I will use pseudonyms (as described above) and I may alter some identifying details to further protect your anonymity if you wish to remain anonymous.

Before You Agree

By signing below or in giving verbal consent, you are agreeing to participate in this project with the possibility of your words being included in writing in a final paper. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of the document will be given to you.

Separate copies will also be kept sealed at New York Theological Seminary and by the researcher. Transcripts of all interviews will be kept separate from this form, for confidentiality.

Print Participant s Name: _____

Participant s Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher s Name: _____

Researcher s Signature: _____ Date: _____

Community Organizer Volunteer Interview (form):

Please provide us with the following information - it will be kept confidential, and not tied to your specific name. This data will be used for analyzing responses only in terms of categories of respondents.

Demographic Data:

Age

Gender

Ethnic Identity

Residence (area in NYC)

Years Organizing

Church Affiliation(s)

Level of education

1. Please describe your experience with CBCO. (Probe for how many years, events participated in, training received, issues addressed)

2. Please tell us about something that left a positive mark in you when you were organizing.

3. Please tell us about what worked as far as being effective with community organizing - what skills did you learn to use? How did you acquire those skills? What was the outcome?

4. Were there any situations that were less than positive in your community organizing experience? What were they? What made them less than positive?

5. What do you do well? What do you wish you could improve? Why?

6. Are there any tips you would like to pass on to other church volunteers as far as CBCO? What should they expect?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

APPENDIX F

About GreenFaith GreenFaith Executive Summary 2024

GreenFaith is building a global, grassroots, multi-faith movement for climate justice.

A long-time pioneer of the religious environmental movement, we have trained thousands of leaders from diverse religions, spearheaded large-scale religious participation in the fossil fuel divestment movement, organized faith turnout for climate mobilizations, and coordinated global multi-faith mobilizations with thousands of local actions.

GreenFaith has 25 staff in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin and North America and members in 40+ countries.

GreenFaith 2025 is our three-year strategic framework. This summary provides our campaigning priorities and the Framework's key thematic areas related action items.

GreenFaith's campaigning priorities through 2025 are:

- End new coal, oil, gas and deforestation projects and related financing
 - Win commitments for green jobs, a just transition, universal access to clean energy
 - Secure loss and damage funding from countries most responsible for emissions
- GreenFaith's Distributed Organizing Approach Base Building: An interconnected, growing global community
Campaigning: Public action for change
Education & Training: Deepening skills and religiously rooted motivation for action

Here's what we will do to equip our movement for success:

1. Activate our base.

Our top priorities:

- A membership growth strategy for each country or region
- 200 Circles by 2025
- Standard operating procedures for country or regional programs in support of grassroots multifaith activism
- A global network of 50+ partner religious organizations to participate in global, multi faith mobilizations

2. Scale up our organizing program.

Our top priorities:

- Systems and trainings to enable Circle alignment, greater agency
- Diverse, regionally contextualized eco theology, eco-spirituality resources and education
- Training on Circle development, campaigning and communication.

Campaigning in:

- Africa: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda
- Asia-Pacific: Indonesia, Japan
- Europe: France, Germany
- Latin America: Brazil
- North America: United States of America
- Additional campaigning possibilities in Nigeria, Ghana, Pakistan

3. Strengthen governance and accountability systems.

Our top priorities:

- Global board to include representatives from Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin and North America
- Regional offices and boards in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, and shared, interlocking regional-global governance practices
- An external review of our progress towards our goals and a new 3-year Strategic Framework with more member input

4. Communicate informatively and passionately.

Our top priorities:

- Compelling national or regional narratives, a global, unifying call to action
- Increase awareness of the impacts of climate change and extractive industries
- National and regional website, email and social media programs
- Communications and digital support to empower our Circles and grassroots

members

5. Fund our expansion.

Our top priorities:

- Increase our annual budget from \$1.9 million to \$3.1 million by 2025
- Increased support from individual, philanthropic foundation, religious agency, and select government donors GreenFaith has assembled a diverse, experienced, international staff. We are developing partnerships with individual, religious, philanthropic, and select government partners in different regions of the world.

To explore collaboration, contact Executive Director Rev. Fletcher Harper at fletcher@greenfaith.org.

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